Mercian Elite Women in Seventh-Century England:

Aspects of Political Networks

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Abstract

The study of elite women in early medieval England has been a popular topic since the 1980s and has recently seen a resurgence in popularity after a short period of decline. Many scholars have drawn our attention to pre-Conquest women religious and their monastic endeavours, queens and various aspects of queenship, as well as the political agency of elite women. Despite this proliferation of scholarship, examination of the political lives and roles of seventh-century elite women in pre-Conquest England has remained understudied. By focusing on Mercian elite women, this thesis begins the process of recovering these women and restores them to the political landscape of seventh-century England by: following reconstructed kinship networks and accepting elite women's inherent ability to hold political power. My thesis presents a series of case studies which highlight the Mercian royal family's mobilisation of networks of women as political instrument.

After an introduction which discusses relevant literature for Mercian elite women and defines methodological considerations for this thesis, my three chapters reveal aspects of political action through and within elite Mercian networks of women. Chapter two provides crucial context for the thesis by revealing, discussing and examining who constituted the Mercian royal family, alongside Mercian methods of rule through *imperium*, and the seventh-century political landscape in which the Mercian royal family operated. Chapter three begins to reinsert Mercian elite women into this political landscape by examining Mercian elite marriages through a poststructural lens and argues that an individual consideration of each elite marriage shows underlying political strategies beyond simple alliance-making. These are the strategies of not only the Mercian royal family, but also the elite families into which they married. Chapter four provides a topographical case study of lands inherited and granted to Mercian elite women which uncovers the potential administrative roles these women held to manage certain areas in the extended Mercian *imperium*. This thesis concludes that Mercian elite women and their kinship networks were crucial for political action, not only for elite women and their possible objectives, but also for Mercian elite men and the political aims and operation of the Mercian kingdom.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Abbreviations

AnnCam	*Annales Cambriae*, cited from: John Williams (ab Ithel), ed., *Annales Cambriae*, Rolls Series 20 (London, 1860). David N. Dumville, ed. and trans., *Annales Cambriae, A.D. 682–954: Texts A–C in Parallel* (Cambridge, 2002).
Add.	Additional
AOELS	Johanna Kramer, Hugh Magennis and Robin Norris, ed. and trans., *Anonymous Old English Lives of Saints*, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Texts (Cambridge, MA, 2020).
ASC	*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*
ASC A	Janet Bately, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, 3: MS A* (Cambridge, 1986).
ASC B	Simon Taylor, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, 4: MS B* (Cambridge, 1983).
ASC C	Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, 5: MS C* (Cambridge, 2001).
ASC D	G.P. Cubbin, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, 6: MS D (Cambridge, 1996).
ASC E	Susan Irvine, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, 7: MS E* (Cambridge, 2004).
ASE	*Anglo-Saxon England*
AU	Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, ed. and trans., *The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)* (Dublin, 1983).
BCS	*Cartularium Saxonicum: a Collection of Charters relating to Anglo-Saxon History*, ed. W. De G. Birch, 3 vols with index (London, 1885–99).
BAR	British Archaeological Reports
BL	British Library
CCCC	Cambridge, Corpus Christi College
HA	*Historia Abbatum*, cited from: Christopher Grocock and I.N. Wood, ed. and trans., *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 2013).
HAE	*History of the Abbey of Evesham*, cited from: Thomas of Marlborough, *History of the Abbey of Evesham*, ed. Jane E. Sayers and Leslie Watkiss, OMT (Oxford, 2003).
HB	John Morris, ed. and trans., *Nennius: British History, and the Welsh Annals* (London, 1980).
HE	Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*, ed. B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, OMT (Oxford, 1969).
EHR	*English Historical Review*
EHD	Whitelock, ed., *English Historical Documents*
MGH	*Monumenta Germaniae Historica*
ECWM	H.P.R. Finberg, *The Early Charters of the West Midlands* (Leicester, 1972).
EME	*Early Medieval England*
EHR	*The English Historical Review*
JMH	*Journal of Medieval History*
LBG	*Liber Beati Gregorii Papae*, cited from: Bertram Colgrave, ed. and trans., *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985).
LE	*Liber Eliensis*, cited from: E.O. Blake, ed., Janet Fairweather, trans., *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely From the Seventh Century to the Twelfth* (Woodbridge, 2005).

MS	Manuscript
NSE	*Natale Sancte Eormenhilde*, cited from: Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, *The Hagiography of the Female Saints of Ely*, ed. and trans. Rosalind C. Love (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).
ODNB	Oxford, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, https://www.oxforddnb.com.
OE	Old English
OMT	Oxford Medieval Texts
PASE	"Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England," http://www.pase.ac.uk/.
PBA	*Proceedings of the British Academy*
S	P. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: an Annotated List and Bibliography*, Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks 8 (London, 1968).
UL	University Library
VSG	*Vita Sancti Guthlaci*, cited from: Bertram Colgrave, ed. and trans., *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge, 1956).
VSW	*Vita Sancte Werburge*, cited from: Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, *The Hagiography of the Female Saints of Ely*, ed. and trans. Rosalind C. Love (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).
VW	*Vita Sancti Wilfridi*, cited from: Bertram Colgrave, ed. and trans., *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus* (Cambridge, 1927).

Introduction

Since Christine Fell's influential and groundbreaking monograph on women in Pre-Conquest England, the study of women, and particularly elite women, has grown and expanded.[1] This thesis falls within this scope of study on elite women and queenship in early medieval England. To be more precise, it deals with elite women during the seventh century. Existing scholarship concerned with the women of this century has generally focused on their literary and socio-cultural constructions in ecclesiastical texts, or their religious and monastic roles within the Church. These previous studies are all crucial and groundbreaking for bringing women to the forefront as a topic of examination in their own right. However, a study of queens and elite women outside of literary constructs and ecclesiastical realms had not been completed as of the beginning of this project.[2] This trend was only recently reversed with the publication of a broad survey for early English queens and the features of their queenly roles. My thesis goes beyond what is currently available by focusing on the elite women connected to one kingdom: Mercia. In this thesis, I examine Mercian elite women and aspects of the political use — both secular and ecclesiastical — of their familial networks during the seventh century. I argue that seventh-century Mercian elite women were pivotal to the Mercian ruling family and their political objectives by focusing on one question throughout: how did the Mercian ruling family mobilise the women of their familial line? By doing this, I begin to fill a gap in scholarship in order to shed light on Mercian elite women and to examine their pivotal political role during the seventh century. It is my hope that this thesis will encourage further investigations for other seventh-century elite women and their political roles.

Because a study of this nature has never been attempted, it is necessary to introduce some of the historiographical and methodological issues which form the foundations of this thesis. In this introduction, I will first discuss literature relevant to this thesis in order to situate my own research in the existing fields of queenship and, more generally, medieval elite women. Furthermore, this section will better define the project. The subsequent section will treat necessary historiographical and methodological considerations: definitions of kinship, the

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[1] Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

[2] For a sample of studies, see: Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a common fate* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1992); Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, CA. 500–1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Sarah Foot, *Veiled Women, Volume I: The Disappearance of Nuns from Anglo-Saxon England* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2000); Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* (London: Continuum, 2003) and Barbara Yorke, "Æthelbald, Offa and the Patronage of Nunneries," in *Æthelbald and Offa, Two Eighth-Century Kings of Mercia: Papers from a Conference Held in Manchester in 2000*, Manchester Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies, BAR, ed. David Hill and Margaret Worthington (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2005), 43–48. For literary examinations of early English elite women, see: Clare A. Lees and Gillian Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, 2nd ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009); Stacy Klein, *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); Diane Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion in England and Beyond, 650–1100* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

question of power, and the frameworks which have led to the exceptionalisation of medieval elite women. This section will briefly expound how this thesis treats and defines kinship which is how I was able to trace genealogical lines and perceived political objectives through these lines. After this, I define current thought behind power and elite women's capacity to wield forms of power which constitute the underlying assumptions of this thesis: elite women were powerful political actors and the women visible in our sources were not exceptional cases in the historical archive. After these sections which define this thesis's placement within scholarship, I give a brief overview of the major sources that are used throughout this project and the methodology behind my use of these sources. The last section will outline the chapters and structure of the thesis.

1.1 — The Study of Early Medieval Queens

The study of medieval queenship and elite women has enjoyed a rise in popularity over the last forty years.[3] As the field has grown, a clear demarcation has developed between the periods receiving scholarly attention and those which have been neglected. Scholarship focusing on the study of elite women and their queenly position in royal courts seems to begin in earnest for the ninth century and to proliferate as we march onward to the late Middle Ages.[4] Those studies which consider evidence from before the ninth century are few, and chiefly concerned with Merovingian Francia and a longue durée examination of the features of queens and nascent queenship.[5] This trend in queenship studies reflects in part the

[3] For a selection of important queenship studies, see: Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple, "The Power of Women through the Family in Medieval Europe: 500–1100," *Feminist Studies* 1, no. ¾ (1973): 126–41; Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (London: Leicester UP, 1983); Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, ed., *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988); L.O. Fradenburg, ed., *Women and Sovereignty* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1992); John Carmi Parsons, ed., *Medieval Queenship* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993); Theresa M. Vann, ed., *Queens, Regents and Potentates* (Cambridge: Academia, 1993); Anne Duggan, ed., *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe: Proceedings of a conference held at King's College London April 1995* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997); Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma & Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), particularly part two, 55–206; Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, ed., *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2003); Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Simon MacLean, *Ottonian Queenship* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017); Heather J. Tanner, ed., *Medieval Elite Women and the Exercise of Power, 1100–1400: Moving beyond the Exceptionalist Debate* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). For an excellent synopsis of the literature and trends, see: Teresa Earenfight, "Medieval queenship," *History Compass* 15, no. 3 (2017): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12372.

[4] This trend can be witnessed in any number of the edited volumes cited above.

[5] The foundational study which gave rise to interest in medieval elite women was: McNamara and Wemple, "Power of Women". Some other examples of pre-ninth-century scholarship are: Janet Nelson, "Queens as Jezebels: the careers of Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian history," in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 31–77; Suzanne Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister 500 to 900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981); Stafford, *Queens, Concubines*; E.T. Dailey, *Queens, Consorts, Concubines: Gregory of Tours and Women of the Merovingian Elite* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Emma

nature and quality of the sources available for different regions and eras. Examinations of early medieval elite women — for this thesis, defined as the sixth through the late eighth centuries — requires a familiarity with a large swath of sources including: literary, documentary, material, and bioarcheological. Even the most stalwart scholar of elite women would find the task of combining these various sources daunting. Thus, a dedicated historical discussion of pre-ninth-century, early English queens has been absent.

Exceptions to this trend include Christine Fell's *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* and Pauline Stafford's *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers* which are both pioneering works that laid the groundwork for subsequent study concerning women in early pre-Conquest England.[6] Of particular interest to this thesis is Stafford's monograph which centers on Francia, Italy and England. She was the first to sketch and outline the features of emerging practices of queenship and elite women's importance to the royal court in western Europe. Stafford highlights the queen's importance to family politics and the royal household, and follows a queen's lifecycle (daughter, wife, dowager) to understand her position in early medieval politics. Her findings are many, and a number of her observations have been echoed in subsequent scholarship. She ties any position, power,[7] or status a queen gained to the direct relationship with her kingly husband and their marriage.[8] Additionally, Stafford finds that a queen's various roles were tied to the operation of the household and her responsibility as bearer of legitimate royal offspring.[9] Like any foundational study, Stafford offers broad observations opening the way for nuanced examinations.

Only recently, during the third year of this thesis (2022), did a summary of early pre-Conquest queenship emerge. In *Early English Queens*, Stefany Wragg examines the practice of early English queenship by offering a broad overview of known queens, between c. 650–850.[10] Her monograph highlights three key features of early pre-Conquest queenship: Christianisation, maternity, and peaceweaving. All three of Wragg's categories are expansions of the key features for queenship first set out in Stafford's monograph, which Wragg amplifies and nuances through comparative studies of various regions and periods in early western Europe.[11] Wragg is the first to define and locate these features within an early

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Jane Thomas, "The 'Second Jezebel': Representations of the Sixth-Century Queen Brunhild," (University of Glasgow, PhD diss. 2012); Pauline Stafford, "Powerful Women in the Early Middle Ages: Queens and Abbesses," in *The Medieval World*, ed. Janet Nelson, Marios Costambeys and Peter Lineham (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 398–415.

[6] Stafford, *Queens, Concubines*; Christine Fell, *Women of Anglo-Saxon England*.

[7] Stafford defines a queen's power in her analysis as a woman's influence or agency.

[8] Stafford, *Queens, Concubines*, 174.

[9] Ibid., 86–90 and 99–114.

[10] Stefany Wragg, *Early English Queens, 650–850: Speculum Reginae* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).

[11] See these sections in Stafford, *Queens, Concubines*: for Christianisation 120–27, for maternity 86–92, for peaceweaving 44–6. For examples of subsequent surveys, see: Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1995); Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma and Edith* and "Queens and Queenship," in *A*

English context, and find features for early pre-Conquest queenship similar to Frankish and Norse models, such as: queens deriving their power through the king; queens acting as intercessors[12] and mediators both for their people and families; the accumulation of a queen's wealth[13]; and their roles as mothers and educators.[14]

However, Wragg also goes beyond these similar key features and identifies distinguishable traits in the practice of queenship unique to early England. One such unique early English feature is the central role that Christianity played in the practice of the queenly office. Wragg links queens to the Christianisation of the early Anglian and Saxon kings, although the actual importance of this influence is debated due to Bede's use of elite women as both a didactic and literary tool.[15] Wragg also links early Christianity's influence to the exercise of royal power through both donations to favoured religious foundations, as well as a queen's entrance into religious life upon the conclusion of her secular roles. However, these features of early English queens have long been recognised.

Another key trait, according to Wragg, is the nonessential nature of motherhood for early queens.[16] Previously, the procreative ability of a western European queen had generally been considered one of her basic roles based on Frankish models.[17] Wragg, following Fell's findings, re-examined queens in relation to demonstrated pre-Conquest succession structures.[18] Because the structure of succession in England at this point was fraternally based (i.e. horizontal) and not reliant on primogeniture, male succession was not in jeopardy if the queen failed to produce the next heir.[19] Thus, a queen's status and her

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Companion to the Early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland c.500–c.1100 (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 459–76; Earenfight, *Queenship*; MacLean, *Ottonian Queenship*.

[12] Intercessory roles need further interrogation, see: Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992), 95–120.

[13] The wealth of queens was first discussed exclusively by: Pauline Stafford, "Queens and Treasure in the Early Middle Ages," in *Treasure in the Medieval West*, ed. Elizabeth Tyler (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2000), 61–82. This has begun to be expanded, but more works needs to be done. See: Phyllis Jestice, *Imperial Ladies of the Ottonian Dynasty: Women and Rule in Tenth-Century Germany* (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2018), 71–101.

[14] The roles of mothers and motherhood has been exquisitely treated by: Mary Dockray-Miller, *Motherhood and Mothering in Anglo-Saxon England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

[15] Wragg, *Early English Queens*, 57–107. The Christianising force of queens in early England is debated. See: Stephanie Hollis, "Queen Converters and the Conversion of the Queen: Bede's Ecclesiastical History and the Royal Marriage," in *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 208–42; Dorsey Armstrong, "Holy Queens as Agents of Christianization in Bede's Ecclesiastical History: a Reconsideration," *Medieval Encounters* 4, no. 3 (1998): 228–41, https://doi.org/10.1163/157006798X00142; Janet Nelson, "Queens as converters of kings in the earlier Middle Ages," in *Agire da donna, modelli e pratiche di rappresentazione (secoli VI–X)*, ed. C. La Rocca (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 95–107; Máirín MacCarron, "Royal Marriage and Conversion in Bede's Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 68, no. 2 (2017): 650–70.

[16] Wragg, *Early English Queens*, 155.

[17] Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 29; Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*, 86–92.

[18] Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, 74–5.

[19] For more on fraternal succession and some complications, see: David Dumville, "The ætheling: a study in Anglo-Saxon constitutional history," *ASE* 8 (1979): 1–33; Pauline Stafford, "Sons and Mothers: Family Politics in the Early Middle Ages," in *Medieval Women*, ed. Baker, 79–100.

continuing role in a kingdom, unlike in Francia, was not linked to her procreative abilities in the early English kingdoms.

Lastly, Wragg upholds the idea of the peaceweaving bride, or the idea that an elite woman married into a rival family for the purpose of creating peace. She emphasises the role of the early English queen as an affinal mediator between families and polities.[20] This idea of the peaceweaving bride is not new. Some pre-Conquest literature describes elite women being sent to marry into hostile kingdoms or families as a means of facilitating peace between two groups. This feature has attracted scholarly attention as apparent examples of marriage alliance for securing peace. However, this concept has been reified as a simple characteristic of early medieval elite marriage. Thus, this idea of the peaceweaving bride has discouraged more wide-ranging interrogation into the individual motivations and cultural roles of such unions. Since the nineteenth century, this idea of an elite bride for alliance bringing peace between two feuding families (or, in some cases, failing to bring about peace) has deep roots in both anthropological as well as Old English literary studies.[21] This theory has transferred over to modern historical examinations to explain and describe elite marriage alliances of the early medieval period.[22] However, more recently the use of the term 'peaceweaving' in historical investigations to describe marriage alliances has come into question. I address this more closely in chapter three. As a comprehensive study of the practice of early pre-Conquest queenship, Wragg sets the stage for further in-depth and granular studies of queenship in early England.

Although Wragg successfully explores a selection of early pre-Conquest practices in queenship, she does not treat elite women — queens, royal daughters, and royal sisters — as a whole. Additionally, despite frequently acknowledging the patriarchal bias of the sources, she does not explore queens' individual political contributions outside of the idealised, female-coded roles described within these sources. By only following the explicit gendered roles found within extant sources, we limit our understanding of elite women's political ability beyond these roles, and thus limit our conceptions of their lived experience. Wragg's oversights open interesting lines of inquiry, such as the political roles of elite women beyond

[20] Wragg, *Early English Queens*, 164–207.
[21] I discuss the historiography of the nineteenth-century literature more thoroughly in chapter three, but the entrenchment of brides for alliance can be connected to the alliance theory first posited by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his seminal work, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer and Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).
[22] For a brief example of recent studies, see: Máirín MacCarron, "Royal Marriage," 652; Emma O. Bérat and Rebecca Hardie, "Introduction," in *Relations of Power: Women's Networks in the Middle Ages* (Göttingen: Bonn UP, 2021), 12; Stefany Wragg, "An 'Authorized Fiction': Towards a Biography of Anonymous 756," *Royal Studies Journal* 8, no. 2 (2021): 26–54.

gendered ones and how elite women as a whole operated in the royal family, not just as a queen or royal daughter.

An in-depth study of carefully chosen cases enables me to analyse elite women's place in early pre-Conquest politics and re-evaluate events that have only been examined through a masculine lens. Throughout this thesis, I consider several questions. Are we able to identify and explore individual political concerns and motivations of Mercian elite women? What appear to have been their aims and concerns? Can we identify these? And if so, how did Mercian elite women pursue and accomplish these individual political concerns? Finally, how did Mercian elite men seek to mobilise their female relatives for their own political aims? I examine these questions by exploring structures of kinship, looking at how practices and ideas of power were negotiated, and by attending to the gaps and silences in the sources which in themselves can be telling.

1.2 — Historiography and Methodology: Defining Kinship, Power and Women's Positions

The gaps and silences that are present in our sources for seventh-century Mercian elite women required that I develop a methodology and theoretical framework that could facilitate my analysis of the available sources. During my initial examination of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* (hereafter *HE*), I noticed allusion to and explicit mention of elite women's networks of kinship. While not explicitly detailed like those of their male counterparts, these brief genealogical references hinted at something deeper.[23] Thus, I began looking beyond the *HE* to sources such as saints' *vitae*, the *Historia brittonum*, or charters and I soon found a trove of feminine genealogy. These references and mentions form the network of seventh-century Mercian elite women that are the foundation of this thesis. However, no database or scholarship exists which can visualise the complete — or as near complete as sources allow — familial networks of early medieval England. To treat this gap, I created a database for viewing these networks of relationship which, in turn, forced me to contemplate definitions of 'kinship'. The first subsection will detail scholarship concerned with pre-Conquest kinship, and my process of thinking, defining, and visualizing the networks of Mercian elite women.

[23] For seminal studies of pre-Conquest royal genealogies and regnal lists, see: Kenneth Sisam, "Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 39 (1953): 287–348; David Dumville, "The Anglian collection of royal genealogies and regnal lists," *ASE* 5 (1976): 23–50 and "Kingship, Genealogies and Regnal Lists," in *Early Medieval Kingship*, ed. P.H. Sawyer and I.N. Wood (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1977), 72–104 and "The West Saxon Genealogical Regnal List: Manuscripts and Texts," *Anglia* 104, no. Jahresband (1986): 1–32.

After defining kinship, I followed these feminine networks down numerous paths. By following elite women and their relations, I began to witness shadowy allusions to women's political and personal action. However, this led me to question definitions of power and what early medieval elite women were capable of during this period: what some term agency.[24] In the subsection following my exploration of kinship, I explore modern definitions and models of power used in the study of elite women which will help illustrate how my thesis defines an elite woman's ability to hold power and act politically.

1.2.1 — Early English Kinship: How this Thesis Defines Relationships

As I briefly mentioned above, I first created a genealogical database using all recognised references to kinship in extant sources so that I could reconstruct seventh-century familial networks. This was crucial for easy visualisation of Mercian elite women's familial connections which are the foundation of this thesis. While scholarship on early medieval genealogies for elite families is plentiful due to the presence of and concern with genealogies in the available sources, and the fact that employing kinship networks in modern examination is an established method of research, no scholarship — nor database — for the seventh century exists which offers a genealogical chart which comprehensively pictures both paternal and maternal lines.[25] Most illustrative charts of seventh-century elite pre-Conquest families that accompany existing studies, prefer to follow a unilineal structure by either tracing a patrilineal (agnatic) or a maternal (uterine) line, for the sake of simplicity. Rarely are charts an inclusive cognatic (both paternal and maternal) rendering of descent because space for a printed depiction is limited, and if the two lines are combined the selection of names is often restricted for the same reason.[26] Thus, I had to create my own comprehensive database. While the database has not been made available as part of the thesis, I have included

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[24] I attempt to limit my use of the term agency in this thesis. I feel the term is too ambiguous to be useful because it has become a catchall for women's viewed actions (i.e. political interference, ability to make decisions, become a woman religious, etc.). In my view, by using this term, elite women's political power is suggested to be less than a man because of the use of different gendered terms, or not recognised at all because it has been placed under the umbrella of agency which might indicate influence rather than political action.

[25] For brief example: Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Those of My Blood: Constructing Noble Families in Medieval Francia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Stephen White, "Kinship and Lordship in Early Medieval England: The Story of Sigeberht, Cynewulf, and Cyneheard," in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. R.M. Liuzza (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002), 157–81; Gerd Althoff, *Family, Friends and Followers: Political and Social Bonds in Early Medieval Europe*, trans. Christopher Carroll (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004); Walter Pohl, "Genealogy: A Comparative Perspective from the Early Medieval West," in *Meanings of Community across Medieval Eurasia: Comparative Approaches*, ed. Eirik Hovden, Christina Lutter and Walter Pohl (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 232–69. For pre-Conquest studies on extant royal genealogies see footnote 23.

[26] A medieval generation is thought to range anywhere between twenty-six to thirty years, and it is generally acknowledged that persons can remember up to their grandparents or great-grandparents. Elisabeth van Houts marks this remembrance between 90–120 years, with Pohl acknowledging that this is around three to four generations. Please see: Elisabeth van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe 900–1200* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1999), 6; Pohl, 'Genealogy,' 258.

expanded genealogical charts for the seventh-century elite families in figures 1.1 through 1.7. I have offered these expanded charts to illustrate the extent of the interconnectedness of the royal families during the seventh century. Throughout the thesis, when necessary, I offer delimited charts for a pointed examination. My efforts have been aided by the Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England (PASE) as a check for my own database, which I hope to continue work on in the future.[27]

Despite the ubiquity of genealogy in medieval works and modern research, a few concerns arise. First, it is widely acknowledged by historians and anthropologists alike that expressed kin reckonings are the prerogative of elite groups and partly based in fabricated and mythical origins.[28] This fact, in turn, has led to questions of authenticity for the earliest recorded generations. The mythical origins of the pre-Conquest royal families, typically expressed as a distant tie to the pre-Christian god Woden and traced through paternal lines, have been previously examined.[29] The royal origins that are linked to pre-Christian gods are no doubt dubious and served the purpose of legitimising a royal family's right to rule. However, members of the early pre-Conquest royal families that appear within three to four generations of documented individuals have a higher likelihood of being authentic. Additionally, the elite nature of genealogical recording has only benefited this project as a foundation despite having an orientation towards the paternal line.[30] I will discuss the Mercian royal family's origins in chapter two. In addition to these mythical origins, recent scholarship into ninth-century mentions of maternal genealogy indicate that when women's kinship connections are highlighted this was explicitly used for immediate political concerns.[31] Although this study focused on ninth-century Wessex and contemporary literature produced in the West Saxon court, it certainly suggests the importance of noting maternal genealogy when it is mentioned. A second concern I had to grapple with was the reach or extent of medieval

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[27] I noticed at the beginning of my first year that King Cenwulf of Mercia (r. 796–821) was only connected to one of his wives in the PASE. The database connects Queen Cynegyth, who grants S 156 with Cenwulf, but was missing Queen Ælfthryth, who witnesses alongside Cenwulf in S 168, 163, 172, 175, 177, 165, 173, 180, and 159. This is one reason why I am cautious about using the PASE as a main source for my constructed database.

[28] For an anthropological discussion, see: Robert Parkins, *Kinship: An Introduction to the Basic Concepts* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 50–3.

[29] For more on the mythic origins of the early pre-Conquest families and their genealogies, see: Kenneth Sisam, "Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies," *PBA* 39 (1953): 287–348; J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 8–20; Kenneth Harrison, "Woden," in *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede*, ed. Gerald Bonner (London: SPCK, 1976), 351–56; David Dumville, "The Anglian collection," and "Kingship, Genealogies and Regnal Lists"; Hermann Moisl, "Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies and Germanic Oral Tradition," *Journal of Medieval History 7*, no. 3 (1981): 215–48; Craig Davis, "Cultural assimilation in the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies," *ASE* 21 (1992): 23–36.

[30] The extant royal genealogies solely detail the ruling men of the royal families and, mythic origins aside, are likely an accurate historical listing of rulers based on Bede's statement that there were individuals who specialized in recording a ruler's reign. See: Bede, *HE* iii.1 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 214–5).

[31] Alex Traves, "Genealogy and royal women in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*: politics, prestige, and maternal kinship in early medieval England," *EME* 30, no. 1 (2022): 101–24.

kin-reckoning. In other words, who was, or was not, considered kin in early pre-Conquest society. I will discuss the historiography concerning this and kinship studies more broadly below.

However, before exploring these implications, it is best that I explain *who* this thesis focuses on and why I use the term 'elite women' instead of 'royal women'. I began this project focusing solely on queens of Mercia which placed the scope of the original project within queenship studies and acted as an extension to previous studies of later Mercian queens of the ninth and tenth centuries.[32] But I soon realised exclusively focusing my attention on queens was unrealistic for the seventh century. This was due not only to sparse sources but also the emerging patterns of political action I identified while examining my reconstructed kinship charts. This pattern was one in which elite women — not just queens — and royal men can be witnessed mobilising their networks of women for political strategy. There has been a recent renewed interest in the mobilisation of women's networks for both later medieval periods and early medieval ecclesiastical purposes.[33] However, there have not been region-specific studies highlighting the use of seventh-century feminine kinship networks in a secular political context, nor for ecclesiastical politics with secular undertones. My thesis begins to fill this gap and open new pathways for exploring early medieval elite women by looking at the secular masculine and feminine uses of networks of women and matrilineal connections. I determined that to properly treat these patterns, I had to expand the scope of my work beyond queens to all Mercian royal women. Hence, I use the term 'elite women' to indicate all women of the Mercian royal family.

Further, I had to decide on my terminology for describing the mobilisation of Mercian elite women as political instruments or agents. Most scholarship uses the term 'women's networks' when describing both a woman's biological and socially cultivated and political

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[32] For studies on Mercian queens (or Lady in the case of Æthelflæd) during and after the eighth century, see: F.T. Wainwright, "Aethelflaed, Lady of the Mercians," in *Scandinavian England*, ed. H.P.R. Finberg (Chichester: Phillimore & Co., 1975), 305–24; Pauline Stafford, "Political Women in Mercia. Eighth to Early Tenth Centuries," in *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon kingdom in Europe*, ed. Michelle Brown and Carol Farr (London: Continuum, 2001), 35–49; M.J. Reeuwijk, "Witnessing to her position: Female Attestations in Mercian Charters c.757–919, and the Social Position of Anglo-Saxon Women," (MA thesis, University of Utrecht, 2007); Kathrin Prietzel, "Appetite for Power: The Anglo-Saxon Regina Gratia Dei," *English Studies* 93, no. 5 (2012): 549–58, https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2012.698532; Scott Thompson Smith, "Remembering the Lady of Mercia," in *Feminist Approaches to Early Medieval English Studies*, ed. Robin Norris, Rebecca Stephenson, and Renée Trilling (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2023), 83–113, https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463721462_CH04.

[33] For a discussion on current trends on research concerning women's networks, see: Emma O. Bérat and Rebecca Hardie, "Introduction," in *Relations of Power: Women's Networks in the Middle Ages* (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2021), 9–18. For previous scholarship on women's networks in an ecclesiastical context, see: Mary Dockray-Miller, *Motherhood and Mothering*, particularly chapter two; Virginia Blanton, "King Anna's Daughters: Genealogical Narrative and Cult Formation in the "Liber Eliensis"," *Historical Reflections* 30, no. 1 (2004): 127–49 and "Presenting the Sister Saints of Ely, or Using Kinship to Increase a Monastery's Status as a Cult Center," *Literature Compass* 5, no. 4 (2008): 755–71, 10.1111/j.1741-4113.2008.00561.x; Julia Hillner and Márín MacCarron, "Female Networks and Exiled Bishops Between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: The Cases of Liberius of Rome and Wilfrid of York," in *Relations of Power*, 19–44.

networks, which certainly could describe the focus of this thesis. However, the term 'women's networks' suggests to me that primarily only women created and mobilised the networks under consideration.[34] In this thesis, I explore how both men and women of the Mercian royal family employ the maternal line for political action. Therefore, simply labeling this study as an exploration of medieval women's networks seems perfunctory. To remedy this implicit understanding of 'women's networks', I use the term 'networks of women' to indicate that the observed political strategy could be enacted by both the women and men of the Mercian ruling family. Additionally, there are instances when the observed action is only through the matrilineal side: a generational action through the maternal line. This occurs in a few cases found in chapters three and four.[35] When this occurs, I use the term 'matrilineal network' to describe the exclusive nature of the observed action.

I treat these networks of Mercian queens and female royal children as a group regardless of biological or affinal connections — including those affinal ties that did not result in the birth of children and thus consanguineal links.[36] This expansion to include all Mercian elite women brings us back to the earlier issue of genealogical reckoning and also raises questions about the construction of not only medieval kinship, but also how I should view kinship in my reconstructed genealogies. Who is considered kin and who is not? How far do these networks extend in time and space, and were they important?

To try and answer these questions, I explored the historiography of kinship studies and how kinship has been previously viewed in historical investigations. Scholarship of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries focused primarily on the functions of western European kinship in relation to feud and *wergild* in extant law codes due to the visibility of kinship within these specific sources.[37] One such scholar, Bertha Phillpotts, in her examination of

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[34] The implicit meaning of 'women's networks', as I have described is apparent in the scholarship listed in the above footnote 31; aside from Hillner and MacCarron's contribution in *Relations of Power* cited in the same note. Another example of scholarship with this understanding of 'women's networks' is: Kathryn L. Reyerson, *Women's Networks in Medieval France: Gender and Community in Montpellier, 1300–1350* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

[35] These matrilineal political networks can be observed in the case of Osyth, the granddaughter of Penda, being mobilised for an elite marriage in chapter three, and her association and religious training with her maternal aunts, Eadgith and Eadburh, in chapter four.

[36] As I discuss in chapter four, it is rumoured that Osthyth, King Æthelred's queen, may have never produced any biological children. Thus, according to some scholarship, her claims to Mercian kinship could be considered tenuous. I discuss this shortly.

[37] Studies of kinship in regard to feud, *wergild*, and land tenure remains a perennial favourite amongst scholars. For an example of the tenacity of kinship in these topics: Frederick Pollock and Frederic W. Maitland, *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1898), 240–60; T.M. Charles-Edwards, "Kinship, Status and the Origins of the Hide," *Past & Present* 56 (1972): 3–33; Patrick Wormald, "Giving God and King Their Due: Conflict and its Regulation in the Early English State," in *Legal Culture in the Early Medieval West: Law as Text, Image and Experience*, ed. Patrick Wormald (London: The Hambledon Press, 1999), 333–55; White, "Kinship and Lordship," 157–81; Julie Mumby, "The descent of family land in later Anglo-Saxon England," *Historical Research* 84, no. 225 (2011): 399–415, doi: 10.111/j.1468-2281.201000569.x. Some recent scholarship has tempered the importance of kin and kinship to the law codes: Tom Lambert, *Law & Order in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), 53–4 and 191–2.

early law codes came to the conclusion that, when compared to continental kinship systems, pre-Conquest England's own systems were relatively weak and their importance to society appeared to breakdown over the course of the medieval period.[38] Phillpotts suggests this weakness, or the societal unimportance of kinship, was apparent in not only the kinship structures of pre-Conquest England, but more generally in early medieval northern Europe. Later, Marc Bloch would go on to argue that this inherent weakness in early medieval northern European kinship could be blamed on its cognatic structure.[39] This structure of kinship placed emphasis on both the maternal and paternal lines instead of solely on the paternal as in a unilineal structure. This would have created shifts in who would be counted as kin dependent on the individual. Additionally, Bloch attributes "the disintegration and attenuation of the kindred group, both as an economic unit and as an instrument of the feud" to wider societal changes around the first millennium.[40]

Responding to these previous studies, which generally homogenised the kinship systems of all northern European peoples into one, Lorraine Lancaster set about, "to bring a little more precision to the description of some aspects of the [pre-Conquest] system".[41] Lancaster, through a study of Old English literature and terminology, extant law codes, and wills, determined that pre-Conquest kinship reckoning was certainly based on a cognatic system of descent — as described by anthropologist Radcliffe–Brown. However, despite a variety of descriptive terms for kin and kinship degrees in the sources, there was a lack of precision that suggests pre-Conquest kinship was less likely to be strictly structured and followed.[42] Lancaster also opposes Phillpotts and Bloch's theory of long-term decline for the societal strength of kinship by showing that these connections remained an important structure up to and through Edward the Confessor's reign by examining later pre-Conquest law codes. However, this importance of kinship was only found to extend to a close circle of family contra Bloch who reckons biological associations as far as first or second cousins.[43] Lancaster could

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[38] Bertha Surtees Phillpotts, *Kindred and Clan in the Middle Ages: A Study in the Sociology of the Teutonic Races* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1913).
[39] Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L.A. Manyon (London: Routledge, 2014), 145–6.
[40] Ibid., 147–8.
[41] Lancaster provided not only a dedicated study for kinship specific to pre-Conquest England, she also contextualised her study with contemporary anthropologists and their studies into kinship. She took particular issue with two prominent anthropologists, J.A. Barnes and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, who had lumped Anglo-Saxon kinship systems with all "Germanic" peoples. Lorraine Lancaster, "Kinship in Anglo-Saxon Society — I," *The British Journal of Sociology* 9, no. 3 (1958): 230–50 and "Kinship in Anglo-Saxon Society — II," *The British Journal of Sociology* 9, no. 4 (1958): 359–77.
[42] Lancaster, "Kinship I," 232-39. For the specific reference Lancaster was using, see: A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, "Introduction," in *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, ed. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde, 2nd ed. (London: International African Institute, 1987), 1–85, specifically 15. A Cognatic system is one that is biologically based and reckoned through both matrilineal and patrilineal lines of ego. For more see: Robert Parkin, *Kinship: An Introduction to the Basic Concepts* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).
[43] Bloch, *Feudal Society*, 147.

only find that pre-Conquest kinship was important when centred around the nuclear family which could include social ties as well as biological ones.[44] This idea that pre-Conquest kinship was only important with regard to the immediate family has been echoed in further scholarship by Loyn, and more recently by Alex Traves.[45]

However, Lancaster's idea for the inclusion of socially-constructed kinship ties as part of the nuclear family seems a unique feature of her argument that has not been explored further in subsequent work on pre-Conquest kinship. Despite the inclusion of these created ties, she qualifies this openness by claiming that early medieval marriage appeared generally unstable. Thus, affinal ties were considered insignificant in preference for consanguineal ones with a trend toward "patrilateral bias".[46] This follows Bloch's statement that "the wife only half belonged to the family in which her destiny had placed her, perhaps not for very long".[47] My thesis considers affinal kinship as important as biological kinship for reasons I will detail shortly.

This idea of a "patrilateral bias", or the preference for tracing kinship through the paternal line, has been the focus of further study. In Andrew Wareham's close examination of several tenth-century wills, he finds that "new agnatic kinship strategies and values replaced ego-centred and bilateral ones in the rituals associated with death and salvation".[48] This shift was in tandem with the Benedictine reform movement of the tenth century, which Wareham notes increasingly relied on kinsmen's gift-giving at the expense of kinswomen.[49] At the same time this shift was occurring in Church benefaction, a similar change was taking place in the laity. The nobility, in particular, began tracing kinship through patrilineal descent instead of through traditional bilateral and ego-centred models.[50] This change in kinship reckoning from an ego-centred, bilateral system to a patrilineal-focused unilineal system indicates a change from every individual having a unique set of kin, to a set of individuals sharing the same

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[44] Lancaster, "Kinship I," 233–34.
[45] H.R. Loyn, "Kinship in Anglo-Saxon England," *ASE* 3 (1974): 197–209, particularly 209; Alex Traves, "Penance, Murder, and the Sanctity of Close Kinship in Early Medieval England and Francia," *Journal of Medieval History* 50, no. 3 (2024): 294–311, doi: 10.1080/03044181.2024.2350007.
[46] Lancaster, "Kinship I," 239–48. She claims that there appears to have been a "patrilateral bias" despite the system's cognatic structure: Lancaster, "Kinship II," 372–3. This argument for an emphasis on the importance of paternal lines is surely heavily influenced by the earlier Germanist scholarship of the nineteenth century, which argued for the supremacy of paternal kin. See: Hans Hummer, *Visions of Kinship in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), 47–54.
[47] Bloch, *Feudal Society*, 144.
[48] Andrew Wareham, "The transformation of kinship and the family in late Anglo-Saxon England," *EME* 10, no. 3 (2001): 375–99, quote 397. Julia Crick has also investigated the use of women's wills and kinship strategies during this period. See: "Women, Posthumous Benefaction, and Family Strategy in Pre-Conquest England," *Journal of British Studies* 38, no. 4 (1999): 399–422 and "Women, Wills and Moveable Wealth in Pre-Conquest England," in *Gender and Material Culture in Historical Perspectives*, ed. Donald and Hurcombe (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 17–37.
[49] Wareham, "transformation of kinship," 397.
[50] Ibid., 398.

network. As I briefly mentioned, this trend toward patrilateral focus was not only a trend in tenth-century English wills: "patrilateral bias" can be found in the earliest genealogies, the foundation of my database. By reinserting elite women into this framework, my thesis begins the process of remediating this bias and shows that cognatic structures, rather than just patrilines, were important to seventh-century Mercia.

Supporting this general shift in the social understanding of kinship taking place in the early medieval period is Donald Bullough's investigation of the semantic changes to the Latin terminology for kinship. He argues that this apparent shift in kinship reckoning to exclude cognatic kin likely began sometime during the early ninth century, thus placing this change earlier than both Lancaster and Wareham suspected.[51] This argument is based on the sematic change in the Latin term *cognatio*. According to Bullough, prior to the ninth century, the use of *cognatio* in extant documents, particularly literary sources, seems to indicate an abstract idea of "relationship" or "kinship", and frequently it could also indicate a "kin-group" or kindred. Other terms which are related and seem to be used in the same sense as *cognatio*, are *genealogia* and *consanguinitas*. Bullough goes on to state that "the persons who collectively form this kin-group are usually referred to as *propinqui* or *parentes* but sometimes… as *amici*".[52] This broad understanding of *cognatio* would contract after the ninth century to place emphasis on the kin and descendants of a direct line, as envisioned by Lancaster.

If these theories are accepted, changes to a more unilineal and patrilateral reckoned system would not begin until well after the period under discussion in this thesis. Accordingly, the seventh-century Mercian royal family would have reckoned kin based on the broader understanding of *cognatio*, what would today be understood as cognatic kinship. Under this system there would be minute changes to kinship reckoning based on the individual in question, and those considered kin could extend to cousin and second cousin, rather than just the nuclear family unit. Most significant to this thesis — and apparent in my re-examination of the sources — is the emphasis on the importance of both the maternal and paternal lines in an individual's familial network. However, these previous studies and the observations of a decrease in the importance of not only kinship reckoning but also the matrilineal line have begun to be questioned, which I explain shortly.

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[51] D.A. Bullough, "Early Medieval Social Groupings: The Terminology of Kinship," *Past & Present* 45 (1969): 3–18, particularly 16–7. Bullough locates this shift around 827 using a document from the continental monastery, St. Gall.

[52] Ibid., 12. In regard to *amici* as a term for kinship, there are more recent studies which expand or understanding of socially constructed kinship in which this comes into play. See: Gerd Althoff, *Family, Friends and Followers: Political and Social Bonds in Early Medieval Europe*, trans. Christopher Carroll (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004); Joseph H. Lynch, *Christianising Kinship: Ritual Sponsorship in Anglo-Saxon England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1998); Paul R. Hyams, *Rancor and Reconciliation in Medieval England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2018), 21–32.

So far, the trends for scholarship on early medieval northern European kinship can amount to arguments surrounding the social strength of kinship and how persistent and far-ranging kin groupings could extend. But affinal, or marriage ties and their importance in constructing familial networks, which are incredibly important to my thesis, appear secondary in the available early medieval scholarship. Lancaster and Bloch are both skeptical about the importance of marriage ties to kin groups because they view these ties as tenuous. However, despite not explicitly commenting on whether affinal ties were important or not, Bullough's interpretation of the Latin terminology could prove otherwise. Bullough shows that the usage of *adfinis*, or "relation by marriage", had all but disappeared by the later fourth century to be replaced with c*ognatus*, *-a*, which could be understood as an "in-law" relation.[53] He attributes this particular semantic shift to the Church's push for newly converted Christians "to accept the incestuous nature of marriage or adultery with a sister-in-law".[54] We can certainly see this push in early pre-Conquest literature for a socially-constructed affinal bond to be considered as important as consanguineal ties as early as Augustine's mission to Kent.[55] With the early medieval Church pushing for affinal connections to be recognised as biological kin, I have treated marriage ties in this thesis as bridges connecting the royal families of seventh-century England. My exploration of marriage in chapter three of the thesis supports this view. While these ties could certainly be severed after a separation, the years that an elite woman spent in her husband's court cultivating networks meant this bridge would not have been destroyed — unless this was her intention.

More recently, there has been criticism for the assumed importance of kinship in early medieval Europe and the use of kinship as a method of study in general. As Hans Hummer points out in his monograph, *Visions of Kinship*, there are inherent issues in the way modern scholarship views and uses kinship as an analytical tool in medieval studies.[56] Many of these perceived issues arise from the nineteenth-century origins of the anthropologically-based field of kinship studies. There are five men credited with the emergence of kinship as a method of study during this period: Johann Bachofen (1815–1887), Henry Sumner Maine (1822–1888), John Ferguson McLennan (1827–1881), Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881), and Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges (1830–1889).[57] Developed as a way to grapple with the revolutionary

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[53] Bullough, "Social Groupings," 9–10.
[54] Ibid., 11.
[55] This can be witnessed in Gregory's responses to a letter that Augustine had sent, particularly response five, as later preserved in: Bede, *HE* i.27 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 84–7).
[56] Hummer, *Kinship*, 1–7.
[57] For their works which highlighted kinship as a means of analysis, see: Johann Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht: Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaikokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur* (Stuttgart: Verlag von Krais & Hoffmann, 1861); Henry Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society and Its Relation to Modern Ideas*, intro. Frederick Pollock (London: John Murray, 1861; reprint, Boston: Beacon Press, 1963); John McLennan, *Primitive Marriage: An Inquiry into the Origin of the Form of Capture in Marriage*

turmoil of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — which had reordered ideas of government and a society based on divine sanction — these studies, by examining Classical civilisations and utilising earlier Germanist scholarship, imagined kinship as a foundational component or mode of societies.[58] As a way to reimagine their present, these examinations were "a potent means by which the West re-engineered its origins and based them exclusively on human forms" as understood by the emerging social sciences.[59] Ultimately, they framed kinship as a path to modernity by arguing that there was a clear path of development in the various described kinship forms — promiscuity, matrilineal, and finally patrilineal — which led to modern structures where kinship was no longer an organising form, but rather 'the state'.[60]

The theories put forth by the original founders of kinship studies and the Germanist historians from which they based their thoughts can be summarised in a chapter written by Paul Vinogradoff in *The Cambridge Medieval History*.[61] In his chapter, Vinogradoff reasserts that early medieval groups were agnatically based. Thus, women could only be part of either their natal or their husband's family.[62] Implied here is that women could not be part of both. Additionally, Vinogradoff states that "nature has taken care to provide the most primitive human beings with ties of relationship", thus highlighting how the nascent field of kinship studies viewed biologically and socially-created bonds as inherent structural features of any given society.[63]

This view of kinship bonds underpinned structural anthropology for the majority of the twentieth century. Indeed, until the 1980's, great anthropological scholars, such as A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, and Claude Lèvi-Strauss, continued their studies with the underlying assumption that kinship relations were the building blocks, or structure, of societies.[64] Mid-twentieth-century historians (including the previously mentioned scholars of

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Ceremonies (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1865); Lewis Henry Morgan, *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian, 1871); Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *La Cité antique: Étude sur le culte, le droit, les institutions de la Grèce et de Rome* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1864). For a comprehensive discussion of their contributions and forces which shaped their thoughts, see: Hummer, *Kinship*, 11–34.

[58] For a cogent discussion of the early Germanist scholarship used by the founders of kinship studies, see: Hummer, *Kinship*, 35–56.

[59] Ibid., 29–34.

[60] Ibid., 47–8

[61] Paul Vinogradoff, "Foundations of Society (Origins of Feudalism)," in *The Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 2, ed. H.M. Gwatkin and J.P. Whitney (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1913), 630–54.

[62] Ibid., 631.

[63] Ibid., 630.

[64] For some of the essential kinship studies of the early to mid-twentieth century, see: A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde, ed., *African Systems*, particularly the introduction to this volume; E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Kinship and Marriage Among the Nuer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951) and for an anthropological view of history, *Anthropology and History: A lecture delivered in the University of Manchester with the support of the Simon Fund for the Social Sciences* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1961); Claude Lèvi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James and John R. von Sturmer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969); Jack Goody, *Comparative Studies in Kinship*

pre-Conquest kinship), using the work of these anthropologists, mobilised structural anthropology to envision medieval society. A year before Lancaster's study which envisioned a weak kinship structure for pre-Conquest England, Karl Schmid, using previously pioneered prosopographical methods, found the same early unstable cognatic bonds which shifted around the turn of the millennium to a patrilineal bias.[65] Schmid's *oeuvre* would later inspire scholars of medieval kinship, such as Georges Duby, Jacques Le Goff, and anthropologist turned historian Jack Goody, who in turn launched the 1980 and 1990's surge of popularity for historical studies utilising kinship networks.[66]

Despite the growing popularity of kinship methodology amongst historians, kinship studies took a poststructural turn in 1984 with David Schneider's publication, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*, which questioned kinship's inherent nature.[67] Schneider, challenging the western European theoretical models of kinship, set out that western anthropologists inherently assume that: a) kinship is a universal given and b) kinship is directly linked to sexual reproduction and continuation of a family.[68] Furthermore, despite the longstanding recognition for social kinship, biological kinship was still a major determinant in kinship models. And, underlying it all was an ethnocentric model that automatically assumed a society's recognition of kinship as understood in the European sense.[69] Since then, the field of kinship studies has turned toward a poststructural model which holds that societies are the makers of kinship rather than kinship being the maker of society.[70] Additionally, there has been a greater focus on the cultural contingency of kinship as opposed to a biological essentialism.[71] The field of kinship studies considers kinship to be constructed by each society as a blend of social and biological connections that are not indigenous or intrinsic to any particular culture — an attempt to amend the ethnocentric model. Who constitutes the family is dependent on cultural and societal constructs.[72] Therefore, using modern western European kinship models for analysis of non-European or historically distant cultures leads to artificial constructions.

(London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969); J.A. Barnes, *Three Styles on the Study of Kinship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

[65] Karl Schmid, "Zur Problematik von Familie, Sippe und Geschlecht, Haus und Dynastie beim mittelalterlichen Adel: Vorfragen zum Thema 'Adel und Herrschaft im Mittelalters," *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 105 (1957): 1–62.

[66] Some seminal studies are: Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff, ed., *Famille et parenté dans l'Occident medieval. Actes du Colloque de Paris (6–8 juin 1974)*(Rome: École Française de Rome, 1977); Jack Goody, *The development of the family and marriage in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983).

[67] David Schneider, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984).

[68] He calls this the "Doctrine of the Genealogical Unity of Man". Schneider, *Kinship*, 187–89.

[69] What he points out as the biological importance of kinship, or the saying "Blood is thicker than water". His argument is succinctly laid out in the final conclusion: Schneider, *Kinship*, 187–201.

[70] For a crucial poststructural study beyond Schneider, see: Maurice Godelier, *The Metamorphoses of Kinship*, trans. Nora Scott (London: Verso, 2011).

[71] For example: Marshall Sahlins, *What Kinship Is — And Is Not* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[72] For more, see: Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon, "New Directions in Kinship Study: A Core Concept Revisited," *Current Anthropology* 41, no. 2 (2000): 275–79; Robert Barnes, "Maurice Godelier and the

Acknowledging and grappling with these changes in kinship studies, Hummer has called into question the validity of using modern kinship models for the Middle Ages. He theorises that kinship, as we understand it today, did not exist during the medieval period. More specifically, he believes "that kinship was never an indigenous category; it was never an abstraction by which people of the time conceptualized their social life" because there is no explicit evidence for medieval works dedicated to the topic of kinship.[73] Instead, he argues that kinship should be viewed as a spiritual bond based within and produced by the monastic culture(s) of the medieval period. In this way, Hummer attempts to revisualise medieval kinship by letting go of structural assumptions and recognising that kinship for medieval individuals was not an ontological category with which they would have been familiar. However, despite these arguments against the way historians have used kinship in the past, Hummer readily acknowledges that "kinship still offers a productive heuristic".[74]

While I do not wholly accept Hummer's arguments, I do agree with his call for a poststructural understanding of medieval kinship as a historically contingent, socio-cultural construct. For this reason, and for those mentioned above, my thesis accepts certain individuals (i.e. wives) as permanent members of the Mercian royal family because certain extant sources allude to continued contact and familial recognition well after the conclusion of a marriage.[75] By acknowledging this aspect of kinship, my thesis has further illuminated political mobilisation of networks of elite women of the Mercian royal family. Despite this acceptance for the political importance of affinal ties — including those marriages that failed to create consanguineal connections and my acceptance of Hummer's call for a poststructural view of kinship — this thesis is still bound to the traditionally recognised language of kinship. Furthermore, my reconstructed genealogical charts also follow kin primarily through biological connections and modern understandings of kinship structures. However, this can only be remedied if there are structural and semantic changes to the wider field of kinship studies: an issue that is much greater and beyond the capacity of this thesis. Until this occurs, I am consigned to using the accepted language of kinship despite fully understanding the problems surrounding its use.

Metamorphosis of Kinship, A Review Essay," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48, no. 2 (2006): 326–58; and especially, Jean-Hughes Déchaux, "Kinship Studies: Neoclassicism and New Wave: A Critical Review," *Revue Française de Sociologie* 47, no. 3 (2006): 591–620; Marshall Sahlins, *What Kinship Is and Is Not* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[73] Hummer, *Visions of Kinship*, 3.

[74] Ibid., 98.

[75] I am not aware of any study which considers conceptions of kinship after a separation for elite partners. Most only consider the role of the woman and the particular political situation which arose to prompt a split (of any kind). That or widowhood. For example, see: Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers*, 71–86; Wragg, *Early English Queens*, 205–207

1.2.2 — The Difficult Nature of Power

I now explore how definitions of power have been interpreted in relation to elite women, and an emerging movement amongst feminist historians — the Exceptionalism debate — which calls for recognition that an elite woman's political actions were not exceptional. Discussions of these two related topics are necessary for understanding why my thesis assumes certain aspects of an elite woman's ability to act politically both for personal motivations and/or for the needs of the kingdom. I will start my discussion by focusing on the influence of Michel Foucault because since the 1980s his theories surrounding *who* can wield power have greatly influenced the field of queenship. Then, I will move to the Exceptionalism debate which will highlight some conceptional issues hindering the understanding of an elite woman's place in the medieval political climate.

Foucault's influence

Defining power is difficult and the amount of scholarship dedicated to the pursuit of defining power structures, both modern and medieval, is too immense to list here. Therefore, this section focuses on the theoretical frameworks offered by Michel Foucault. In particular, Foucault's theories of power offer broader conceptual understandings of power which allow for the inclusion of women in discussions of rulership beyond reproductive capacity and the elite household. Previously, definitions of medieval power typically centred on a king's ability to rule within monarchical power structures.[76] These structures, viewed as masculine because they were predicated on patrilineal lines of descent, gave rise to a general definition of power differences between the king and queen as 'hard' or 'soft' power. Under these definitions, 'hard' power is viewed as active power. It is witnessed in military authority, the command of soldiers, and the ability of force. The other side of power, the 'soft', manifests as diplomacy, influence, and social pressure.[77] In other words, 'soft' power is passive. Therefore, monarchical power is necessarily exclusionary to royal women because women inherently hold

[76] For a small selection of scholarship on medieval kingship, see: Walter Ullmann, *The Carolingian Renaissance and the Idea of Kingship* (London: Methuen & Co., 1969); J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings* (London: Methuen and Co., 1962) and *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); P.H. Sawyer and I.N. Wood, ed., *Early Medieval Kingship* (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1979); Janet Nelson, "Kingship and Empire," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought c.350–c.1450* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), 211–51; Wendy Davies, "Celtic Kingships in the Early Middle Ages" and Janet Nelson, "The Political Ideas of Alfred of Wessex," in *Kings and Kingship in Medieval Europe*, ed. Anne Duggan (Exeter: Short Run Press, 1993), 101–58; Gale Owen-Crocker and Brian Schneider, ed., *Kingship, Legislation and Power in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013).

[77] The distinctions between the two sides of power are elucidated in: Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy* 80 (1990): 153–71.

a 'lesser' form of power. Recent scholarship on queens which utilises Focault's model have begun to view these systems of rule and power differently.

Generally, scholarship on medieval elite women and the power they held revolves around theories developed by Michel Foucault.[78] In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault began to shape his ideas of power which he centred around the concept of disciplinary power.[79] Unlike Max Weber and his ideas of legitimate power and illegitimate coercion, Foucault frames power in *Discipline and Punish* as both the dynamics of power and knowledge networks which occur between subjects or socially recognised individuals.[80] Disciplinary power constitutes the subject. The power dynamic created by discipline informs the subject as to how they should behave in a particular setting. This concept of performed expectations would be further developed by Judith Butler.[81] The concept of social performance is highly gendered, and this can be witnessed in expected performative acts of the queen and court.[82] As a queen and member of an elite family, a woman was expected and had to perform certain roles, such as being a mother, an intercessor for family and her husband, and for some early English elite women, being a pious Christian.

However, it is Foucault's other work, *The History of Sexuality*, that has had the most profound influence on modern concepts of power.[83] This prevalence could be attributed to Joan Scott's call for the implementation of Foucault's concepts of power in gendered historical analysis because his methodologies allow for human agency.[84] In *The History of* Sexuality, Foucault continues to develop his ideas from *Discipline and Punish* by explicitly expanding and detailing his theory. Power does not originate from "the sovereignty of the state, the form of the law, or the over-all unity of a domination".[85] In other words, power is not from unified, nor centralised institutions as imagined by previous scholars, neither is it coherent. Rather, these

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[78] There are some critiques of Foucault in the feminist community. For example, see: Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2013); Margaret A. McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012).

[79] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1977).

[80] For more, see: Max Weber, *On charisma and institution building: selected papers*, ed. S.N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) and *Basic concepts in sociology*, trans. H.P. Secher (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969).

[81] This was part of the basis for Judith Butler's theory of performativity. See: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[82] Butler's theory has been used successfully to explain pre-Conquest motherhood in: Dockray-Miller, *Motherhood and Mothering*, 2–4. While Butler was not used to inform Koziol's work on rituals of political order in tenth-century Francia, the performative nature of court rituals and expectations of disciplinary power shine throughout the monograph. See: Geoffrey Koziol, *Begging Pardon and Favor: Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992).

[83] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), specifically 92–102.

[84] Joan Scott in her foundational piece solidly set gender as an historical method. See: Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–75, for Foucault's mention, 1067.

[85] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 92.

institutions and groups are only the final forms in which power manifests. Instead, Foucault declares that power is omnipresent because it is produced in every interaction. Therefore, it is everywhere because it comes from everywhere.[86] He goes on to state that, "Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations".[87] Because power is understood as something that comes from interactions, resistance to that power is part of power relationships.[88]

Foucault's conception and definition of power has enabled queenship scholars to analyse elite women with the understanding that they were not powerless actors confined to household duties. These women were not simply influencers reduced to whispering in the ear of the king, although this type of influence is potentially very powerful. The queen's influence certainly ended Rædwald's (d. 616x27) thoughts of handing an exiled Edwin (c. 586–633) over to his enemy, Æthelfrith (d. 616).[89] Elite women could practice administrative power and rulership like their male counterparts, albeit fewer records remain likely due to patriarchal preferences.[90] Women had power and agency.[91] This Foucauldian understanding for elite women's ability to hold power has opened numerous research pathways and has been the basis of works focusing on elite women after the ninth century.

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[86] Ibid., 93.
[87] Ibid., 94.
[88] Ibid., 95.
[89] Bede, *HE* ii.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 181). Influence is a ubiquitous and amorphous term and there are many mentions of a queen's 'influence'. But there are few pointed studies on the influence of elite women. For some examples, see: Stafford, *Queens, Concubines*, 94–8; Barbara Hanawalt, "Lady Honor Lisle's Networks of Influence," in *Women & Power*, ed. Erler and Kowaleski, 188–212; Janet Nelson, "Women at the Court of Charlemagne: A Case of Monstrous Regiment?," in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. Parsons, 43–61; Michael J. Enright, "Ritual, Group Cohesion and Hierarchy in the Germanic Warband," in *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 1–37; Sarah Rees Jones, "Women's Influence on the Design of Urban Homes," in *Master Narrative*, ed. Erler and Kowaleski, 190–211.
[90] Tanner, Gathagan, and Huneycutt, "Introduction," in *Medieval Elite Women*, ed. Tanner, 3. For the smallest example of scholarship, see: Lois Huneycutt, "Female Succession and the Language of Power in the Writings of Twelfth-Century Churchman," in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. Parsons, 189–201 and Armin Wolf, "Reigning Queens in Medieval Europe: When, Where, and Why," 169–188; Amalie Fößel, "The Political Traditions of Female Rulership in Medieval Europe," in *The Oxford Handbook of Women & Gender in Medieval Europe*, ed. Judith Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 68–83; Heather Tanner, "Women's Legal Capacity—Was the Thirteenth-Century a Turning Point?," in *Paradigm Shifts in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Transformations, Reformations, and Revolutions in the Pre-Modern World*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Leiden: Brepols, 2019), 81–96.
[91] For more on agency, see: Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

The Exceptionalism Debate

Despite the increasing use of Foucault's conceptualisation of power by scholars of medieval women, examples of elite women exercising levels of political power are still generally framed by scholars as exceptional or extraordinary. This is due to three prevailing concepts: the public/private dichotomy, the concept of a Golden Age, and a gendered approach to the sources. Despite having been extensively argued against, both the public/private and Golden Age models have persisted in scholarship through either an implicit or explicit methodological application. Additionally, gendered study is a well-accepted method of analysis which has expanded our knowledge of medieval women in uncountable ways. But such approaches to rulership have recently been critiqued as an analytical tool. Due to the underlying persistence of public/private and Golden Age models and the established benefits of gendered studies, I find it necessary to explain why this thesis rejects the use of these analytical models despite their predominance in scholarship.

First, I will address the problems of the public/private dichotomy, before turning to the Golden Age. The concept of the public/private dichotomy is still common in studies of medieval women despite longstanding arguments against its broad applicability.[92] This model holds that the public sphere was the domain for politics of the kingdom and public discourse, while the private sphere was that of the household. Such areas assumed to be public facing were for men, while women were charged with domestic affairs and relegated to the private sphere. These distinctions are highly gendered and do not reflect the lived reality for the early medieval world, which I relate below. This dichotomy has given rise to the prevalence of exceptionalism for one reason: any medieval woman found in the historical archive operating outside of what is traditionally viewed as private or domestic affairs was and is still considered by many scholars to be an exceptional case.

The predominance of the public/private dichotomy is attributable to the recognised importance of the medieval family as a socio-cultural construction, and modern notions that the category 'family' is a private one. It was also, ironically, made popular by the groundbreaking work of Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple in the early 1970s.[93] They argued that, prior to c. 1050, early medieval elite women had the ability to gain and hold "impressive personal domains and concomitant economic and political power" through

[92] The continued use of this model is likely attributable to the nature of our sources which generally relegate women to their idealised, female-coded roles. Because women are mainly relegated to household activities in sources such as Hincmar of Reims' *De ordine palatii* and *Beowulf*, this has coloured our view and thus we examine women in these private (household) roles. For example, see: Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013).
[93] McNamara and Wemple, "Power of Women".

inheritance and marriage practices.[94] They found that elite women often used this economic and political pull for their own ends, separate from familial strategies. However, Wemple and McNamara also stressed that elite women drew importance from their specific familial roles as brides, wives, and mothers. Elite women had gained power through family because of the "irregular powers" of royal families.[95] Furthermore, Wemple and McNamara argued that after c. 1050, women lost this status and ability to wield public power due to the emergence of primogeniture and the rise of the public power of the monarchies. Wemple and McNamara's use of the public/private dichotomy, and their adherence to a Golden Age model for women before c. 1050, became popular during the 1980s and long after.[96]

The public/private dichotomy and Golden Age have unfortunately reinforced the prevailing belief that visible elite women of the medieval period were exceptional or extraordinary.[97] However, criticism for the gendered binary of the masculine-coded public and feminine-coded private abound, as well as the mythical Golden Age of women.[98] A substantial body of scholarship has continued to further demonstrate that women continued the same level of status and ability to hold power after c. 1050.[99] Furthermore, arguments against the public/private dichotomy are also plentiful. For example, Jinty Nelson has aptly asked: what is a 'private life'?[100] She states that, for the early medieval period, there was no

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[94] Ibid., 129. The early medieval dowry system and its study is highly intertwined with studies devoted to the exploration of marriage, dowagers, and Roman law. For a brief selection of scholarship focused solely on the dowry system, please see: Florence Griswold Buckstaff, "Married Women's Property in Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman Law and the Origin of the Common-Law Dower," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 4 (1893): 33–64; Jack Goody, *The development of the family and marriage in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), particularly appendix 2, 240–61; Diane Owen Hughes, "From Brideprice to Dowry in Mediterranean Europe," in *The Marriage Bargain: Women and Dowries in European History*, ed. Marion A. Kaplan (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1985), 13–58; Antti Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 52–73; Philip L. Reynolds, "Marrying and Its Documentation in Pre-Modern Europe: Consent, Celebration, and Property," in *To Have and To Hold: Marrying and Its Documentation in Western Christendom, 400–1600*, ed. Philip Reynolds and John Witte (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 29–40 and "Dotal Charters in the Frankish Tradition," 114–64.

[95] McNamara and Wemple, "Power of Women," 136.

[96] The theory that pre-Conquest and continental women enjoyed greater freedoms before the Norman Conquest, or until c.1000, appeared in pre-Conquest scholarship before McNamara and Wemple's study. For an example of scholarship arguing for a Golden Age, see: Doris Mary Stenton, *The English Woman in History* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957), 1–28, particularly 28; Sheila Dietrich, "An Introduction to Women in Anglo-Saxon Society," in *The Women of England From Anglo-Saxon Times to the Present*, ed. Barbara Kanner (London: Mansell Publishing, 1980), 32–56; Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*. For explanation of the impact of these two models, see: Tanner, Gathagan, and Huneycutt, "Introduction," *Medieval Elite Women*, 4–10.

[97] Wragg uses the term extraordinary throughout her study of early English queens.

[98] For theory critical examination, see: Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56–80. The exceptionalism movement in queenship studies argues against the 'public'/ 'private' model. This will be discussed shortly.

[99] For example: Constance Bouchard, "The Origins of the French Nobility: A Reassessment," *American Historical Review* 86 (1981): 501–32 and "Family Structure and Family Consciousness Among the Aristocracy in the Ninth to Eleventh Centuries," *Francia* 14 (1986): 639–58; A.L. Klinck, "Anglo-Saxon Women and the Law", *Journal of Medieval History* 8 (1982): 107–21; Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 7; Pauline Stafford, "Women and the Norman Conquest," *TRHS* 4 (1994): 221–49; Amy Livingstone, *Out of Love for My Kin: Aristocratic Family Life in the Lands of the Loire, 1000–1200* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2010).

[100] Janet Nelson, "Review: The Problematic in the Private," *Social History* 15, no. 3 (1990): particularly at 363–64.

such category especially for the elite. The private and domestic were part of the very public royal court, which was the location of the kingdom's politics.[101] The royal household was also the royal court where both kin, officials, visiting elite families, and servants congregated and lived while on itineration around the kingdom.[102] For the early Middle Ages, the private was the public. Therefore, the medieval women found in historical sources appear because they belong there: they are not extraordinary nor are they exceptional. As this thesis will demonstrate, Mercian elite women can be found operating politically throughout their familial networks and these were not exceptional cases. These women's actions were the norm: they were all functioning in their expected role as members of the Mercian royal family.

This brings me to the last point concerning gendered approaches and the applicability of this to medieval rulership. Viewing structures of power entirely through a gendered approach may actually hinder our understanding of medieval power structures in which Mercian elite women moved and operated. For example, Theresa Earenfight has recently called into question the viability of using gendered models of power when examining royal and elite women. She notes that gendered studies create a binary of power that necessarily hold men in positions which trump elite women's powers and political accomplishments.[103] In gendered power models, women are regarded as intrinsically less powerful, and therefore, always at disadvantage in scholarship. In order to avoid this, Earenfight proposes that we not "toss out all considerations of gender, but that we focus on the job description: the sources of power and what people are actually doing".[104] This viewpoint is informed by Foucault's concept of power which goes beyond the simple idea of power as action, which I discussed

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[101] For scholarship on the royal palace or 'great hall' and politics, see: Janet L. Nelson, "Aachen as a Place of Power," in *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Mayke B. de Jong, et. al. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 217–41; Matthew Innes, "People, Places and Power in Carolingian Society," in *Topographies of Power*, ed. Mayke de Jong, 397–437; Stuart Airlie, "The Palace Complex," in *Diverging Paths?: The Shapes of Power and Institutions in Medieval Christendom and Islam*, ed. John Hudson and Ana Rodríguez (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 255–90; David Rollason, *The power of place: rulers and their palaces, landscapes, cities, and holy places* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2016); Adam McBride, "The role of Anglo-Saxon Great Hall Complexes in Kingdom Formation, in comparison and in context, AD 500–750" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2018), 81–3; Jayne Carroll, Andrew Reynolds and Barbara Yorke, ed., *Power and place in Europe in the early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2019); Gabor Thomas and Christopher Scull, "Practice, Power and Place: Southern British Perspectives on the Agency of Early Medieval Rulers' Residences," *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 54, no. 1-2 (2021): 1–28, 10.1080/00293652.2021.1910337.

[102] The early pre-Conquest royal household still needs to be examined. But for studies of later pre-Conquest England and other areas of western Europe, see: William Ian Miller, "Some Aspects of householding in the medieval Icelandic commonwealth," *Continuity and Change* 3, no. 3 (1988): 321–55; Peter Parkes, "Fosterage, Kinship, and Legend: When Milk Was Thicker than Blood?," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46, no. 3 (2004): 587–615; Alban Gautier, "Butlers and dish-bearers in Anglo-Saxon courts: household officers at the royal table," *Historical Research* 90, no. 248 (2017): 269–95; Megan Welton, "Domina et Fidelibus Eius: Elite Households in Tenth-Century Francia and Anglo-Saxon England," in *Royal and Elite Households in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: More Than Just a Castle*, ed. Theresa Earenfight (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 15–41.

[103] Theresa Earenfight, "A Lifetime of Power: Beyond Binaries of Gender," in *Medieval Elite Women*, 272–73.

[104] Ibid., 275.

above. Power comes in many forms, is manifested through relations, and is always present even when not visible.[105]

This thesis contributes to a growing body of scholarship which rejects the idea of exceptionalism when examining elite women and calls for holistic studies of rulership that account for both a king and queen's importance and partnership.[106] The so-called Exceptionalism movement calls for the rejection of the public/private and Golden Age models and the acceptance and normalisation that elite women had an active place in politics. Understanding this provides a significantly better and nuanced insight into the medieval political world. Therefore, I examine the elite Mercian women in this thesis with the assumption that they were crucial to the healthy functioning of the Mercian hegemony and had a pivotal role in rulership.[107] It cannot be overstated that the women in this study are not exceptional nor extraordinary. They were performing their duties as elite women of the Mercian kingdom and had power linked to their status through the benefit of their birth.

An elite women's inherent right of belonging to the royal family from which she was born meant she had access to some level of potential power from birth.[108] This sentiment diverges from Wragg and Stafford who argue that an early pre-Conquest elite woman's power originated from her relationship to the men in her life: husbands, fathers, and brothers.[109] On a certain level, this was true and it is important to recognise the patriarchal control experienced by medieval women.[110] For example, some Merovingian elite women came from non-elite families, like Fredegund the wife of King Chilperic, and only accessed political power through the marriage to their husbands.[111] But the networks of women and the political actions of both men and women within these networks discussed throughout this thesis, point to a distinctive range of possibilities for early English elite women: situations where the power they held was theirs alone, cultivated through personal and familial connections.

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[105] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 92–3; Earenfight, "Lifetime of Power," 275.
[106] See the introduction in: H.J. Tanner, ed., *Medieval Elite Women*.
[107] The rule of a political unit is beginning to be viewed as a partnership between a king and queen. Therefore, like Earenfight, I think it is best to use the term rulership, rather than kingship whose very name excludes women or monarchy which indicates one ruler. See: Earenfight, *Queenship in Europe*, 6–12.
[108] This thought is derived from Hummer and kinship studies. Citing Sahlins and Godelier, Hummer states, "kinship is not a fact of birth; rather, kinship precedes birth. What this means is that every person is born into a kinship "system" which has *a priori* imposed on that person a set of expectations about who they will be related to, whom they can marry (or not marry), what place they hold within a family or kin group, where they fit within the procession of ancestors, who will get what property, and so forth." See: Hummer, *Visions of Kinship*, 102.
[109] Wragg, *Early English Queens*, 5; Stafford, "King's Wife" and *Queen Emma and Queen Edith*, 59–75.
[110] Patriarchal bounds and restrictions are still present, and Judith Bennett has argued for an understanding of a "patriarchal equilibrium", or the continuity of patriarchal structures over time regardless of differences in application. See: Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 54–81.
[111] For more on Fredegund, see: Dick Harrison, *The Age of Abbesses and Queens. Gender and Political Culture in Early Medieval Europe* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 1998); Dailey, *Queens, Consorts, Concubines*; Edward James, "Elite Women in the Merovingian Period," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World*, ed. Bonnie Effros and Isabel Moreira (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020), 243–47.

1.3 — Sources Used Throughout This Thesis and Methodological Considerations

This section will provide a brief overview of the sources used throughout this thesis. This will include a discussion of how I dealt with two key obstacles of these sources: the sparseness of contemporary evidence and the patriarchal bias within certain texts. Despite the omnipresent issue concerning the dearth of early medieval sources and the masculine concerns of medieval male authors which frequently overwrote women, my thesis has found it possible to give an account of Mercian elite women and political action (such as marriage and concerns for Mercian *imperium*) through kinship networks. Many of the seventh- to mid-eighth-century sources laid out below, mention Mercian elite women only briefly, and the information given is often an aside or terse comment that does little to illuminate the political presence and action of the women in question. Additional information is sometimes transmitted in later sources from the turn of the ninth century and as late as the fifteenth. It must be noted that almost every source, contemporary or later, originates from outside the Mercian *imperium*. Furthermore, it has been long recognised that nearly all early sources transmit information in a way that is shaped by male interests and medieval forms of patriarchy.[112] This has scrubbed, or as Diane Watt terms it "overwritten", the viewpoint of women from the early pre-Conquest archive.[113] Due to these many factors, much of our information for Mercian elite women has been called into question. Therefore, in this section, I will first briefly explain how I dealt with these two issues, and then introduce the major sources used in this thesis.

First, to cope with the sparse early medieval archive, I have turned toward queer theorist, José Esteban Muñoz, and his idea of ephemera, or 'invisible evidence'.[114] Queer studies has long had to grapple with issues similar to those of early medievalists such as missing, absent or misrepresentative/sterilised sources. This reality makes queer theoretical approaches appealing to myself and this thesis, Muñoz in particular. In Muñoz's article, "Ephemera as Evidence", he describes the concept of ephemera as, "all of those things that

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[112] This phenomenon of the 'woman as metaphor' is examined by: Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009); Stacy S. Klein, *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

[113] She states, "that monastic writers… overwrote female authorities and women's texts in the sense that they rewrote women's narratives, replacing their oral or written accounts, the 'underwriting', with new versions." See: Diane Watt, *Women, Writing*, 4. This erasure of women's orality is also examined by: Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, chapter 2.

[114] José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 5–16.

remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself".[115] This description of exiguous pieces is certainly representative of the early pre-Conquest archive in general and, in particular, those Mercian elite women examined in this thesis. What remains of these women are the glimmers of mention contemporary writers allowed, or the later (re-)writings of authors far removed. Alone these individual traces of early pre-Conquest royal women cannot create a reliable picture. But merging and combining the specks and residual traces begin a process of illuminating brief snapshots of lived experience: a still shot in time. These still shots are what I focus on in this thesis and I expand as much as possible by standing on more solid ground.

The second key obstacle I faced was patriarchal bias — and in turn, misogyny — present in the available sources. The available sources for seventh-century Mercia can be found in: Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, Bede's prose *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* (hereafter *VSC*), Bede's *Historia Abbatum* (hereafter *HA*), the anonymous *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* (hereafter anon*VSC*), *Historia Brittonum* (hereafter *HB*), *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*(s) (hereafter *ASC*), onomastic or naming evidence, charters and documentary evidence, and lastly, a host of saints' *vitae*. These will all have their own sections below which will give a brief accounting of some of the scholarship. One feature shared by all of these listed sources, apart from onomastics, is that they derive in some form from ecclesiastical authors. Most have been credited to male religious, though there is growing awareness for women's involvement in written and literary production.[116] However, due to the predominance in production of textual sources by male religious, women were easily either only mentioned for didactic purposes or omitted all together.[117]

Scholarship, despite acknowledging this feature, has continued to view women through this given masculine lens. Studies of elite women have long deployed categories created by the historical archive, such as peaceweaving brides, women as mediators or counsel-givers, or intercessors. To be sure, these are important categories and roles for medieval women; Mercian elite women certainly fulfilled these female-coded roles. However, as I explained at the end of the previous section, solely examining the gendered roles of the sources limit our understanding of the importance of these women to the royal family, rulership, and women's political action. To expand our understanding, we need to look beyond those gendered roles.

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[115] Muñoz, "Ephemera," 10.

[116] See: Diane Watt, "The Earliest Women's Writing? Anglo-Saxon Literary Cultures and Communities," *Women's Writing* 20, no. 4 (2013): 537–54 and *Women, Writing*; A. Radini, et. al., "Medieval women's early involvement in manuscript production suggested by lapis lazuli identification in dental calculus," *Science Advances* 5, no. 1 (2019): 10.1126/sciadv.aau/7126.

[117] This bias is recognised in much of the secondary scholarship, especially women's studies, but some of the fundamental studies for early pre-Conquest England are: Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, particularly chapters 6 and 8; Clare A. Lees and Gillian Overing, *Double Agents*.

To do this, I shall examine familial connections and call attention to the networks of Mercian elite women mobilised for political purposes. Letting go of gendered analysis is just one way to mitigate the masculine-lens of the sources.

Additionally, alongside letting go of gendered assumptions, I had to acknowledge the historically and regionally contingent variability of patriarchal control. This is the very topic addressed by Judith Bennett in *History Matters*.[118] She highlights that scholarship fails to consider that, despite change, the overall force of patriarchal power has endured.[119] Bennett called for the understanding of a 'patriarchal equilibrium': the acknowledgment of a continual presence of patriarchal forms and structures throughout history despite unequal application. Women still deal with patriarchal structures and suppression today, as they did in the early medieval period.[120] I am not calling for a presentist examination, nor am I saying that we live the same experience as medieval women. We certainly do not. However, elite women, like women of today, had agency and were still able to participate in society outside of the household. Additionally, by viewing misogyny as a function, system, and symptom of the patriarchy, instead of an individual action, this highlights misogynist clerical writing as a reaction to women deemed 'not in their place.'[121] This understanding of a 'patriarchal equilibrium' and the function of misogyny in a patriarchal system, helps to transcend the masculine-lens of the sources and validates Mercian elite women's political contributions as a normal function of the royal family. But how do we view the political actions of elite women that, like Muñoz has described, are ephemeral and remain in traces?

I address this challenge by examining and collecting every mention of Mercian elite women and the royal family's kinship network as envisioned by the medieval sources. I pay particular attention to matrilineal lines and their connections to the patrilineal network. In essence, I replace kings and elite men with queens and elite women as 'ego' within the familial network. Something never attempted for the early pre-Conquest period. By tracing these networks of women, I aim to temper the ambient masculine lens of the sources and shed gendered binaries to explore the political motivations of the seventh-century Mercian royal family and the actions of Mercian elite women beyond their recognised female-coded roles. I have already briefly described the main sources I used to accomplish the reconstruction and

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[118] Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).
[119] Ibid., 63.
[120] For example, the persistent wage gap, and the repealing of Roe versus Wade in the United States. Bennett weighs in on why scholarship would rather see change instead of continuity. See: Bennett, *History Matters*, 69–70.
[121] Kate Mann argues that misogyny "functions to enforce and police women's subordination and uphold[s] male dominance. Misogyny can be violent or non-violent and applied by both men and women when women seem to violate the order of things. See: Kate Mann, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018).

reinsertion of the Mercian matrilineal line into the royal family's genealogy. Now, I will highlight each source to give a broad overview of scholarship pertinent for this thesis.

1.3.1 – The Venerable Bede – Historia ecclesiastica, Vita Sancti Cuthberti, and Historia Abbatum

The most widely used source for early Mercia originates from one of the most celebrated writers of early pre-Conquest England, the Venerable Bede (c.673–735). Bede was a lifelong monk from the age of seven who resided at the monastic establishments of Wearmouth and Jarrow.[122] While Bede lived most of his adult life during the eighth century, he had access to an impressive library and a monastic network from whom he requested sources for the completion of his many works.[123] The three Bedan works out of his large corpus that have been most important for this thesis are the *HE*, the prose *VSC*, and lastly his *HA*.[124]

All three texts are some of our earliest narratives for this period. While the *HE* is the most crucial text in this thesis, it was not the first of the mentioned texts to be written. This distinction belongs to the *VSC*. Bede's composition of the prose *VSC* — he also composed a metrical version — has an estimated composition date of somewhere around c. 721.[125] Both of Bede's recensions of the *VSC* were composed using an original model written by an anonymous monk of Lindisfarne, the anon*VSC*, another source used in this thesis thought to have been composed between 699–705.[126] Following the chronological composition, the next

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[122] The amount of scholarship on Bede, his life, and his corpus is far too great to be all listed here. For a brief sampling on his life, see: Gerald Bonner, ed., *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede* (London: SPCK, 1976); James Campbell, "Bede I" and "Bede II," in *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1986), 1–48; Nicholas Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in context* (London: Routledge, 2006), 6–20; George Hardin Brown, *A Companion to Bede* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), 1–16; Michelle Brown, "Bede's life in context," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bede*, ed. Scott DeGregorio (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 3–24. For Bede's relationship with Benedict Biscop, the founder of Wearmouth and Jarrow, see: Patrick Wormald, "Bede and Benedict Biscop," in *Famulus Christi*, 141–69 and Ian Wood, "The foundation of Bede's Wearmouth-Jarrow," in *Companion to Bede*, 84–96.
[123] See: D.P. Kirby, "Bede's native sources for the 'Historia Ecclesiastica'," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 48, no. 2 (1966): 341–71; Rosalind Love, "The library of the Venerable Bede," in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Volume I c.400–1100*, ed. Richard Gameson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 606–32.
[124] Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* (Prose), in *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: a Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), 141–308 and Bede, *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, ed. and trans. Christopher Grocock and Ian Wood (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2013).
[125] Date of composition for the prose VSC was estimated by Colgrave and most follow this dating: *Two Lives of Cuthbert*, 16. For Bede's metrical version of the *VSC*, see: Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* (Metrical), in *Bedas metrische Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, ed. Werner Jaager, Palaestra, 198 (Leipzig: Mayer and Müller, 1935). To my knowledge, Bede's metrical *VSC* has enjoyed little scholarship, but this version of the *VSC* is not important to this thesis. For more, see: Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600–899* (London: Hambledon Press, 1996), 332–55 and Britton Elliott Brooks, "Ruminative Poetry and the Divine Office: Bede's Metrical Vita Sancti Cuthberti," in *Restoring Creation: the Natural World in the Anglo-Saxon Saints' Lives of Cuthbert and Guthlac* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2019), 67–121.
[126] For the text, see: *Two Lives of Cuthbert*, 59–139.

text Bede wrote was the *HA*. Composed sometime between 725 and 731, the *HA* is a history of the abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow.[127] The text that is considered Bede's crowning achievement, the *HE*, is at the core of this thesis. Completed in 731, a few years before his death in 735, the *HE* circulated widely, and its content became a leading source of knowledge for the seventh century in later histories and annals.[128]

Bede's purpose for writing such an expansive history has been and is still rigourously debated. The context, purpose, theme(s), and Bede's problematic dating have all been discussed thoroughly by other scholars.[129] However, there are several themes which are of particular interest to this thesis. One of these themes is the purpose behind Bede's composition of the *HE*. Bede himself declared the *HE* had been composed for posterity and as a moralistic model. He also named his chief oral sources, and that he wrote using documents obtained from Kent and Rome.[130] But modern readers have perceived other agendas behind the composition of the *HE*. There are two arguments which have arisen: the view of Bede as a structural and moral reformer of the Church in Northumbria, and the *HE* being strictly political in his opposition to Bishop Wilfrid and the influential Wilfridian supporters.[131] These motivations are important to consider when interrogating the *HE*.

However, the other theme, and what is most important to this thesis, concerns Bede's treatment of women. Bede mentions elite women only sparingly, indicating that when he does, they were relevant to his narrative aims. There are several prevailing thoughts in scholarship on Bede's minimization of women in the *HE* and *VSC*. Stacy Klein views Bede's treatment of women as a cultural model for the creation of social ideologies.[132] Looking at the *HE*, she found that Bede overwrote elite women's role in the Christianisation process to shift male rulers' dependence on marriage alliances for conversion toward Christian doctrine.[133] Stephanie Hollis also marks the diminishment of the role and status of elite women in her book

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[127] For more on the dating of the HA, see: *Abbots of Wearmouth*, xviii–xxii.
[128] For more on Bede's influence on the continent, England, and into the modern, see: Antonia Gransden, "Bede's Reputation as an Historian in Medieval England," in *Legends, Tradition and History in Medieval England*, ed. Gransden (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1992), 1–29; Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede*, 20–40; Joshua Westgard, "Bede and the continent in the Carolingian age and beyond," in *Bede*, ed. DeGregorio, 201–15 and Sharon M. Rowley, "Bede in later Anglo-Saxon England," 216–28. The *HE* was later translated into OE sometime at the end of the ninth century or beginning of the tenth. For more on this, see: Sharon M. Rowley, *The Old English Version of Bede's Historia Ecclesiastica* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011). The *HE* has also been linked to the beginning entries of the *ASC*, see: Simon Keynes, "Manuscripts of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," in *Book in Britain, 537–52*.
[129] For a discussion on the context, purpose(s), and structure, see: Higham, *(Re-) Reading Bede*; Richard Shaw, *How, When and Why Did Bede Write His Ecclesiastical History?* (London: Routledge, 2022).
[130] *HE*, preface (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 1–7).
[131] See: Alan Thacker, "Bede's Ideal of Reform," in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill*, ed. Patrick Wormald, Donald Bullough and Roger Collins (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 130–53; Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede*, 54–69; Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988), 235–328.
[132] Klein, *Ruling Women*, 4 and 19.
[133] Ibid., 17–52.

Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church. The monograph traces the erosion of early pre-Conquest elite women's position through the establishment of the Mary / Eve stereotype in the early Church and later OE literature.[134] She argues that Bede's near silence on elite women and the patchy coverage on abbesses of double monasteries is a push for the active marginalisation of women and support for male clerical superiority. This apparent misogynic act of silencing powerful elite women is emphasised further in Lees and Overing's *Double Agents*. Here, they examine Bede and his mention, or lack thereof, of Abbess Hild of Whitby.[135] They find that Bede's discussion of Hild's role(s) at Whitby focused on her maternity, foundation of Whitby, and capacity as a mentor and educator. Thus, he effectively sterilizes her political power and influence over lay and ecclesiastical interests.

1.3.2 – Historia Brittonum

The *HB* was an important contributor to my reconstructed genealogies for some obscure elite men and women's familial connections.[136] Traditionally attributed to an author named Nennius until roughly the 1970s, the *HB* is a collection consisting of history, pseudo-history, and genealogies. A short text, it has been transmitted in a series of approximately fifty-nine manuscripts dating from the first half of the eleventh century to the later eighteenth century, but the earliest dated archetype can be traced to either c. 755/800 or 829/30.[137] Despite the late date of the extant manuscripts, there are signs that an earlier common ancestor existed, and Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews argues remnants of the archetype can be found in the Chartres manuscript (Chartres, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 98).[138] Despite the ninth-century date of the *HB*, the text originates from somewhere in northern Wales, either the kingdom of Gwynedd or Powys. Both Mercia and the Northumbrian kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia were heavily involved with several Brittonic kingdoms, including these two Welsh-Brittonic kingdoms. It is possible that the compiler of the original text could have supplemented available sources with his own Brittonic ones.[139] If this was the case, the additional information

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[134] Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 12–3.
[135] Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 19–34.
[136] I have used Morris's edition throughout this thesis: Nennius, *Arthurian Sources, Volume 8: Nennius: British History and the Welsh Annals*, ed. and trans. John Morris (London: Phillimore & Co., 1980).
[137] For examinations of the textual history, see: Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews, "Genealogia Brittonum: revisiting the textual tradition of the Historia Brittonum," *Studia Celtica* 54 (2020): 45–73, dating 65; David Dumville, "Historia Brittonum: an Insular History from the Carolingian Age," in *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. Anton Scharer and Georg Scheibelreiter (Wien: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1994), 406–34 and "The Textual History of the Welsh-Latin Historia Brittonum" (PhD. diss., University of Edinburgh, 1975).
[138] Fitzpatrick-Matthews, "Genealogia Brittonum," 64–5.
[139] While not confirmed, it is argued that the writer of the *HB* had access and used Bede's *HE*. See: Kenneth Jackson, "On the Northern British Section in Nennius," in *Celt and Saxon: Studies in the Early British Border*, ed. Nora Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1963), 20–62; David Dumville, "Historia Brittonum: an Insular History from the Carolingian Age," 432–34.

on elite women and men, regardless of the *HB*'s complicated textual history and later date, gives us further insight into the familial networks found in this thesis.

1.3.3 – The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle(s)

The *ASC*, like Bede's *HE*, is a familiar source for the pre-Conquest period.[140] Consisting of seven manuscripts and one fragment, the first compilation, the so-called common stock, originates from the reign of King Alfred of Wessex (r. 871–899).[141] No contemporary manuscript of the common stock survives, but the *ASC* A, or Parker Chronicle (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 173), is dated to the reign of Edward the Elder (r. 899–924), Alfred's oldest son, and is thought to be the earliest extant version of the *ASC*. Derived from this common stock were the other texts of the *ASC* which were distributed around England and, because of the nature of annals — clear beginning but open end suggestive of continuation — invariably improved upon at some of these locations.[142] The surviving manuscripts which are traditionally labelled A–H, with their local entry variations and additions, have been edited in a collaborative series with David Dumville and Simon Keynes as general editors.[143]

Because the *ASC* was produced at Alfred's court, the question of audience and political manipulation of the content is always a concern of scholarship.[144] First, when it comes to this thesis's subject, elite women, the text of the *ASC* is as laconic as our other sources. When they do appear, the terseness of the entry belies women's importance to the surrounding narrative, or statement of said entry. Pauline Stafford argues that elite women found in the *ASC* were an important part of and signal for what appears to be a ninth-century political

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[140] Literature on the *ASC* is extensive. For a sampling, see: Janet Bately, "The Compilation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 60 BC to AD 890: Vocabulary as Evidence," *PBA* 64 (1978): 93–129 and "The Compilation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Once More," *Leeds Studies in English* 16 (1985): 7–26; Thomas A. Bredehoft, *Textual Histories: Readings in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Alice Sheppard, *Families of the King: Writing Identity in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Jacqueline Stodnick, "Second-rate Stories? Changing Approaches to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," *Literature Compass* 3, no. 6 (2006): 1253–65; Alice Jorgensen, ed., *Reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: Language, Literature, History* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010); Courtnay Konshuh, "Constructing Early Anglo-Saxon Identity in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles," in *The Land of the English Kin: Studies in Wessex and Anglo-Saxon England in Honour of Professor Barbara Yorke*, ed. Alexander Langlands and Ryan Lavelle (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 154–80.
[141] For more on the compilation and manuscript history of the various chronicles, see: Whitelock, ed., *EHD*, 109–25; Simon Keynes, "Manuscripts of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain. vol. I, c.400–1100*, ed. Richard Gameson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), 537–52.
[142] Keynes, "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," 540–1.
[143] For the editions used in this thesis, see: Janet Bately, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, Volume 3, MS A* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1986); G.P. Cubbin, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, Volume 6, MS D* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996); Susan Irvine, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, Volume 7, MS E* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004); Peter Baker, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, Volume 8, MS F* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000)
[144] See: Barbara Yorke, "The Representation of Early West Saxon History in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," in *Reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: Language, Literature, History*, ed. Alice Jorgensen (Turnhout, Brepols, 2010), 141–59.

and masculine manufactured narrative.[145] In other words, when women appear, it is an important signal for a particular event and not a simple aside.

Additionally, the genealogies found in the texts of the *ASC*, focus like the earlier Anglian royal genealogies on kings and appear to be shaped for the benefit of the West Saxon royal family of Alfred.[146] Found in nineteen separate annals of the *ASC*, there are twenty separate and alliterative genealogical passages announcing familial descent of the pre-Conquest male rulers.[147] The implicit manipulation surrounding the royal genealogies in the *ASC* was important to acknowledge when I created familial descent charts and when addressing modern conceptual political models.

The appearance of women and the royal genealogies in the *ASC* highlights an additional benefit for using this source in a study of the seventh century. Both the use of women and the genealogies for constructing histories in the ninth century illuminates the employment of all sources available to Alfred for this endeavour.[148] The acknowledged use of Bede's *HE* for the beginning entries are part of this network of interconnection, and yet there are pieces of information not found in the *HE* that appear in the *ASC*. Considering this, the *ASC* certainly derived information from sources no longer extant, albeit from a West Saxon perspective. Therefore, parts of chapter two and three used the *ASC* to either confirm dates or augment that which Bede failed to mention.

1.3.4 – Onomastics

Onomastics, or the study and history of proper names, can assist in making tentative connections by placing names within certain family groups.[149] The thought is based on the prevalence of and tendency for certain alliterative patterns found in early English family

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[145] For a study examining West Saxon women in the *ASC*, see: Pauline Stafford, "Reading Women in Annals: Eadburg, Cuthburg, Cwenburg and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles," in *Agire de donna: Modelli e pratiche di rappresentazione (secoli VI–X). Atti del convegno (Padova, 18–19 febbraio 2005)*, ed. M.C. La Rocca (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 269–89.

[146] See: Bredehoft, *Textual Histories*, 14–38. For an argument about the royal audience of the *ASC*, see: Nicholas Brooks, "Why is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle About Kings?," *ASE* 39 (2010): 43–70.

[147] Bredehoft, *Textual Histories*, 14.

[148] Jacqueline Stodnick calls for the *ASC* to be approached as a compilation of interconnecting and overlapping materials and not a perfected piece. See: "Second-rate Stories? Changing Approaches to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," *Literature Compass* 3, no.6 (2006): 1260–61.

[149] The foundational work for Anglo-Saxon England is still Searle's *Onomasticon* with renewed interest taking place in the last thirty years. See: William George Searle, *Onomasticon Anglo-Saxonicum: a list of Anglo-Saxon proper names from the time of Beda to that of King John* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1897); Henry Bosley Woolf, *The Old Germanic Principles of Name-Giving* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1939); Stephen Wilson, *The Means of Naming: a social and cultural history of naming in Western Europe* (London: UCL Press, 1998); Fran Colman, *The Grammar of Names in Anglo-Saxon England: the Linguistics and Culture of the Old English Onomasticon* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014); Elizabeth Okasha, *Women's Names in Old English. Studies in Early Medieval Britain* (London: Routledge, 2016).

groupings.[150] For instance, Penda's queen, Cynewise's name alliterates and shares a naming part with two of her daughters, Cyneburh and Cyneswith. Additionally, the early sons of the Kentish royal family — Æthelberht's son Eadbald and later male Kentish royalty — shared naming parts that alliterated with 'E',[151] while the early West Saxon royal family alliterated with 'C'. This preference for name sharing is not isolated to seventh-century England. Ninth- and tenth-century continental nobility showed preference for naming their daughters after women from the patrilineal line.[152] There may be sociological implications underlying this trend. A study of modern patterns of usage for either patronymic (paternal) or matronymic (maternal) names suggest this practice may reinforce or communicate familial connections to those outside a particular family.[153] Unlike Francia, naming patterns in pre-Conquest England infrequently reused whole family names. Instead, OE names appear as a blend between paternal and maternal lines.[154] This is due to the dithematic structure of most OE names: or the two-part naming system which joined a prefix and suffix, thus allowing for the combination of separate naming parts.[155] The recycling of duplicate name-elements within families is easily noticeable, with children sharing name themes either from their mother or father, and sometimes, both.

The combination of different possible naming patterns assists modern observers to determine whether an individual without explicit links to a particular family can be placed within its register.[156] And as the brief example of Cynewise, Cyneburh, and Cyneswith shows, this method can be applied to the Mercian royal family as well. Nevertheless, this is an imprecise method which points to possibility not certainty. There are more repetitious names than others. Just as there are popular names today, there were popular names in early England. While families did have recurrent name themes and alliterative predilections, these patterns and structural parts were not exclusive and so duplicate names often appear.[157] The

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[150] For examples on alliterative naming groups within certain royal families, see: Barbara Yorke, "The kingdom of the East Saxons," *ASE* 14 (1985): 15 and Simon Keynes, "Mercia and Wessex in the Ninth Century," in *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon kingdom in Europe*, eds. Michelle Brown and Carol Farr (London: Leicester UP, 2001), 315–19.
[151] This might reflect the name of Æthelberht's father, Eormenric. Bede, *HE* ii.5 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 150–1).
[152] Constance B. Bouchard, "Patterns of Women's Names in Royal Lineages, Ninth-Eleventh Centuries," *Medieval Prosopography* 9, no. 1 (1988): 1–32 and "The Migration of Women's Names in the Upper Nobility, Ninth-Twelfth Centuries," *Medieval Prosopography* 9, no. 2 (1988): 1–19.
[153] Ryan P. Brown, Mauricio Carvallo and Mikiko Imura, "Naming Patterns Reveal Cultural Values: Patronyms, Matronyms, and the U.S. Culture of Honor," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40, no. 2 (2014): 251–52.
[154] This is also a naming style that has been observed in migratory and family groups with mixed ethnicity. See: Francesco Cerchiaro, "'In the name of the children': mixed couples' parenting analysed through their naming practices," *Identities* 26, no. 1 (2019): 51–68.
[155] See: Coleman, *Grammar of Names*, 101–25; Okasha, *Women's Names in Old English*.
[156] For a small example of successful pre-Conquest examinations using onomastics, see: Janet Nelson, "Reconstructing a Royal Family: Reflections on Alfred, From Asser, chapter 2," in *People and Places in Northern Europe 500–1600: Essays in Honour of Peter Hayes Sawyer*, ed. Ian Wood and Niels Lund (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1991), 47–66.
[157] Wilson, *The Means of Naming*, 80–1.

conjectural nature of onomastics to place individuals into certain families invites caution when locating familial networks. It has the potential to misidentify elite women.[158] For this reason, I approach onomastic analysis with care in this thesis.

1.3.5 – Charters and documentary sources

Charters, or remaining records of land and/or privilege grants, wills, writs, lawsuits, and church councils, can be a most illuminating source for kinship networks and hegemonical concerns. Often kinship connections, lost in other sources, are listed within the body of a charter. This was the case for Mercian princess, Mildburh, and her half-brothers Merchelm and Mildfrith whose relationship is only described in charter S 1799.[159] Additionally, confirmation of a charter by a reigning king of another kingdom, or the presence of a subking, alludes that the confirming king may have had claims of *imperium* in the region.[160] This phenomena can be witnessed in the charters of the seventh century, during which time the introduction of charter production to England occurred; therefore, charters and the events they preserve have been helpful for this thesis.

Pre-Conquest diplomatics and its extensive historiography are a study of their own.[161] Determining the authenticity of pre-Conquest charters is difficult because there was never an agreed upon standard and the individual monastic centres created their own standards of practice.[162] Additionally, few charters survive in their original form with the vast majority having been copied into later cartularies.[163] These later cartularies typically preserve only

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[158] This occurred in Wragg's monograph with Ecgfrith's second wife, Iurminburh.
[159] This charter can be found within the text of "St Mildburg's Testament".
[160] For a seminal work showcasing how charters offer an insight into a ruler's reign, see: Simon Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred 'the Unready' 978–1016* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980).
[161] For a sampling of scholarship on the pre-Conquest charters, see: Frank M. Stenton, *The Latin Charters of the Anglo-Saxon Period* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955); Pierre Chaplais, "The Origin and Authenticity of the Royal Anglo-Saxon Diploma," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 3, no. 2 (1965): 48–61; Pierre Chaplais, "The Anglo-Saxon Chancery: From the Diploma to the Writ," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 3, no. 4 (1966): 160–74; Pierre Chaplais, "Some Early Anglo-Saxon Diplomas on Single Sheets: Originals or Copies?," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 3, no. 7 (1968): 315–36; Christopher Brooke, "Approaches to Medieval Forgery," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 3, no. 8 (1968): 377–86; H.P.R. Finberg, "Some Crediton Documents Re-Examined: With Some Observations on the Criticism of Anglo-Saxon Charters," *The Antiquaries Journal* 48, no. 1 (1968): 59–86; Pierre Chaplais, "Who Introduced Charters into England? The Case for Augustine," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 3, no. 10 (1969): 526–42; Anton Scharer, *Die Angelsächsische Königsurkunde im 7. und 8. Jahrhundert* (Wien: Hermann Böhlaus Nachf., 1982); Karl Heidecker, ed., *Charters and the Use of the Written Word in Medieval Society* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000); Therese Marie Flanagan and Judith A. Green, eds., *Charters and Charter Scholarship in Britain and Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005); Sarah Foot, "Reading Anglo-Saxon Charters: Memory, Record, or Story?," in *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West*, eds. Elizabeth Tyler and Ross Balzaretti (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006): 39–65; Jonathan Jarrett, ed., *Problems and Possibilities of Early Medieval Charters* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).
[162] Chaplais, "Origin and Authenticity".
[163] Chaplais, "Copies or Originals?".

partial information with attestation lists frequently excised during copying. This is a regrettable loss of information since witness lists often inform modern scholars about who was considered important based on position within the attestation list and potential given titles.[164] Other early charters were used during later forgery production and were often destroyed afterwards to hide the fact.[165] However, a skillful forgery typically only changed details relevant to their goal; thus, even a spurious charter has the potential to hold authentic elements. With this, a careful eye is necessary when determining whether a document is authentic, partially authentic, or spurious, as well as when ascertaining what genuine material might have been incorporated into a fabricated charter. Despite these issues with early charters, they remain some of the best sources for examining the early pre-Conquest political environment, the tracing of land ownership and exchange of land which was crucial for chapter four of this thesis.

My analysis has certainly benefitted from the extensive work of previous scholars when it comes to charters and determining authenticity. A tradition of exacting diplomatic scholarship extends back to the nineteenth century and essential studies can be found cited in the Electronic Sawyer database.[166] This database is the compilation of information regarding extant pre-Conquest charters using Peter Sawyer's annotated hand-list and bibliography as a foundation.[167] The system Sawyer established is that which I use throughout this thesis and is indicated by an 'S' followed by the given number. This is the same system used in the critical editions of the pre-Conquest charters which is an ongoing, joint project of the Royal Historical Society and the British Academy. To date, they have published nineteen volumes organized by the relevant religious foundation which housed the charters. Where charters have been published as part of this project, I have followed the judgements on authenticity in those editions. For charters that have not yet been published in critical editions, I have followed the scholarship cited in the Electronic Sawyer and more recent scholarship where available.[168]

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[164] This form of examination gained in popularity after Simon Keynes published his *Diplomas of King Æthelred* in 1980.

[165] See: Brooke, "Approaches to Medieval Forgery," 377–86; Georges Declercq, "Originals and Cartularies: The Organization of Archival Memory (Ninth-Eleventh Centuries)," in *Charters and the Use of the Written Word*, 147–70; Katrinette Bodarwé, "Gender and the Archive: The Preservation of Charters in Early Medieval Communities of Religious Women," in *Saints, Scholars, and Politicians: Gender as a Tool in Medieval Studies: Festschrift in Honour of Anneke Mulder-Bakker on the Occasion of Her Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, eds. M. van Dijk and Renee Nip (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2005), 111–32.

[166] The Electronic Sawyer website is an online database which holds information on pre-Conquest charters based on the numerical system established by Peter Sawyer. Whilst this is an invaluable source for initial research, the secondary sources are only covered up to 2007 and some of the textual transcriptions of the diplomas are incomplete. See: "The Electronic Sawyer Online Catalogue of Anglo-Saxon Charters," first accessed Apr 2019, http://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/about/index.html; Peter Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography* (London: The Royal Historical Society, 1968).

[167] Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*.

[168] For more on this project, see: Simon Keynes, "Anglo-Saxon Charters," *British Academy Review* 1 (1998–99): 22–24, accessed July 11, 2021, https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/556/16-keynes.pdf.

Even though authentic charters are considered to be more reliable sources, other less reliable charters have value as well. Charters regarded as dubious are often so considered because they have suffered interpolation or scribal error. But even these can transmit some kernels of original material, as I briefly mentioned above. This is true for spurious documents as well. Because production of forgeries involved the use of original charters, contentious and spurious documents can transmit authentic material. This is considered throughout this thesis: I try to follow charters deemed authentic or based on authentic material.

While the use of charters and wills is ubiquitous in studies of later pre-Conquest women, any investigation using pre-ninth-century charters is hindered by the infrequent appearance of women within these earlier documents.[169] Women's wills, an important source for pre-Conquest women, do not survive before the tenth century.[170] Additionally, the regular attestation of queens only began during the ninth century. An important note concerning this development, is that Mercia was the first kingdom in early England where queens began appearing with growing regularity during King Offa's (r. 757–796) reign in the last quarter of the eighth century. A preliminary investigation of later eighth- and ninth-century Mercian women in charters was undertaken by Greetje Reeuwijk, who noticed a change in the form of women's involvement.[171] Reeuwijk observed that late-eighth- to early-ninth-century royal women only acted as testators — or witnesses for a charter — whereas later-ninth-century charters were joint grants with their husbands.[172] This indicates that women went from being simple witnesses to being actively involved in the granting process. Unfortunately, charter attestation data is rare for late-seventh- and early- eighth-century English elite women in their secular life (because of the problems outlined above), with exceptions found in Mercia (S 76, 77) and Kent (S 15, 16, 18, 19, 21, 22). In all these cases, a queen is either alluded to in the body of the charter or as testator. Most early instances of elite women found in grants are focused on ecclesiastical centres such as Minster-in-Thanet or Wenlock.[173] My thesis shows that

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[169] For a small example of later studies using charters and wills, see: Dorothy Whitelock, ed. and trans., *The will of Æthelgifu: a tenth century Anglo-Saxon manuscript* (Oxford: Roxburghe Club, 1968); Mark A. Meyer, "Land Charters and the Legal Position of Anglo-Saxon Women," in *The Women of England From Anglo-Saxon Times to the Present: Interpretive Bibliographical Essays*, Barbara Kanner (London: Mansell, 1980), 57–82; Julia Crick, "Women, Posthumous Benefaction, and Family Strategy in Pre-Conquest England," *Journal of British Studies* 38, no. 4 (1999): 399–422 and "Women, wills and movable wealth in pre-Conquest England," in *Gender and Material Culture in Historical Perspective*, ed. M. Donald and L. Hurcombe (London: Macmillan, 2000), 17–37.
[170] For a discussion on the complexity of the pre-Conquest 'will', see: Dorothy Whitelock, ed. and trans., *Anglo-Saxon Wills* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1930), vii–xliii; Linda Tollerton, *Wills and Will-Making in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2011). For examples of women's wills, see: S 1495 (will of Æthelflæd); S 1497 (will of Æthelgifu); S 1539 (will of Wynflæd).
[171] Reeuwijk, "Witnessing to her position".
[172] Ibid., 142.
[173] For Minster-in-Thanet: S 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 26, 86, 87, and 1180. For Wenlock: S 1798, 1799, 1800, and 1802. Wenlock's early charters are preserved in what Finberg termed "St. Mildburg's Testament". To see a discussion on and edited copy with accompanying translation for this document, see: H.P.R. Finberg, *The Early Charters of the West Midlands*, 2nd ed. (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1972), 197–216.

despite the infrequence of elite women's appearance in the available charters, they are useful in analysis for determining certain kinship connections. In chapter four, charters will be considered for the evidence they transmit about women's land grants and intentional land gifting.

1.3.6 – Vitae

Other than Bede's *HE*, most of our information for Mercian elite women originates from saints' *vitae*. Early pre-Conquest elite women's participation in and founding of monastic houses alongside their role in sponsoring devotion to saints explains their frequent appearance in extant *vitae*.[174] Furthermore, Barbara Yorke found that, as part of the conversion process, many elite women of the seventh century were sanctified after death to demonstrate a royal family's continued holiness after an initial sanctification of a male member of the family.[175] This sanctification of some elite women was a logical initiative because many were members, leaders, and/or patrons of religious foundations. While there are surviving contemporary *vitae* in which the elite women studied in this thesis appear, the large majority of our pre-Conquest female saints' *vitae* survive in later recensions and compositions. This is attributable to the boom in hagiographic production beginning in the eleventh and lasting until the late twelfth century.[176]

The reason for this growth of hagiography on early pre-Conquest saints during the eleventh and twelfth centuries are manifold. John Blair found that *vitae* and cult proliferation coincided with a boom in minster (re-)foundation and the vital role that a founding member played in forming the minster's character and endowments.[177] Kerryn Olsen had similar findings when examining post-Conquest production of pre-Conquest female saints' *vitae*.

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[174] Thacker traces the introduction of local saints' rites and saint making to the monastic connections between elite English women and female nunneries on the continent, specifically Faremoûtier-en-Brie. Furthermore, Yorke traces the introduction of double monasteries to these very same female connections with the continent. See: Alan Thacker, "The Making of a Local Saint," in *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 45–73; Barbara Yorke, "Queen Balthild's 'monastic policy' and the origins of female religious houses in southern England," *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 20 (2017): 7–16. For more on women's involvement in saints' cults, see: Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, "Women's Monasteries and Sacred Space: The Promotion of Saints' Cults and Miracles," in *Gender & Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*, ed. Lisa Bitel and Felice Lifshitz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 68–86.

[175] See: Barbara Yorke, "The Adaptation of the Anglo-Saxon Royal Courts to Christianity," in *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300–1300*, ed. Martin Carver (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), 243–57.

[176] For example: J. Campbell, "Some Twelfth-Century Views of the Anglo-Saxon Past," in *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History*, 216–25; Rosalind Love, ed., *Goscelin of Saint-Bertin: The Hagiography of the Female Saints of Ely*, OMT (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), xi–xlviii; John Blair, "A Saint for Every Minster," in *Local Saints and Local Churches*, ed. Thacker and Sharpe, 476.

[177] Blair, "Saint for Every Minster," 471–75.

According to Olsen, venerated female saints typically had royal connections which led Olsen to two conclusions. The first was that the elite early pre-Conquest female saint in question had been abbess of the particular institution; and thus, an important source of benefaction and income. The second conclusion was that a royal saint was better able to attract wealthy patrons for continued prosperity of the religious foundation.[178] Despite the lateness of most surviving *vitae* and the near mythic roles these elite women found in the *vitae* played to the later reformed minsters, the information used in the composition of these *vitae* can at times be based on lost sources and/or oral transmission.[179] Hence, later accounts of early medieval saintly women deserve careful scrutiny not immediate rejection.

For this reason, I treat genealogical and other personal information in transmitted *vitae* as accurate unless found demonstrably unreliable. There are two categories in which I have placed these *vitae*. My first category is the *vitae* of male saints where elite women can be observed interacting with a particular saint, or actively promoting the saint's cult. The other category is the *vitae* of sainted Mercian elite women in which we can find genealogical data and snippets of their lives.

The earliest, datable *vitae* out of both groups are the: *Liber Beati Gregorii Papae* (hereafter *LBG*), the Anon*VSC*, Bede*VSC*, the *Vita Wilfridi* (hereafter *VW*) and *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* (hereafter *VSG*).[180] The Anon*VSC*, written at Lindisfarne and found in seven manuscripts, is the earliest composition dated to between 699 and 705.[181] Bede wrote his prose *VSC*, modelled after the Anon*VSC* sometime before 716 but after composing a metrical version.[182] The Bede*VSC* survives in thirty-six manuscripts.[183] Composition of the *LBG* can be dated to between 704 and 714 based on information found in the text.[184] While authorship cannot be determined, the *LGB* was certainly composed at Whitby making a female author a possibility. The *VW* was composed sometime after Wilfrid's death in 709 but no later than

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[178] Kerryn Olsen, "Questions of Identity: Rewriting Anglo-Saxon Female Saints in Post-Conquest England c.1066–c.1500" (PhD diss., University of Auckland, 2009), 48.
[179] Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, "Saints' Lives as a Source for the History of Women, 500–1100," in *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History*, ed. Joel Rosenthal (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 285–320; Blair, "Saint for Every Minster," 478–84; Barbara Yorke, "'Carriers of the Truth': Writing the Biographies of Anglo-Saxon Female Saints," in *Writing Medieval Biography, 750–1250: Essays in Honour of Frank Barlow*, ed. David Bates, Julia Crick and Sarah Hamilton (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), 49–60.
[180] For the editions used, see: Bertram Colgrave, ed. and trans., *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1927); *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1956); *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985); *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985).
[181] Colgrave, ed., *Two Lives*, 13, and for a description of the manuscripts 17–20.
[182] For dating, see: Goffart, *Barbarians*, 256, no. 108. For the metrical *VSC*, see: Michael Lapidge, ed., *Bede's Latin Poetry*, OMT (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2019).
[183] See Colgrave for the manuscript history: *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, 45–50.
[184] Colgrave, ed., *Life of Gregory*, 46–8. For arguments concerning female authorship, see: Clare Lees, "In Ælfric's Words: Conversion, Vigilance and the Nation in Ælfric's Life of Gregory the Great," in *A Companion to Ælfric*, ed. Hugh Magennis and Mary Swan (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 276, no. 15; Diane Watt, "The Earliest Women's Writing? Anglo-Saxon Literary Cultures and Communities," *Women's Writing* 20, no. 4 (2013): 545–51.

720.[185] The last text, *VSG*, was used more for kinship construction in chapter two because of reference to obscure Mercian ties. The dating for the composition of the *VSG* is estimated to have occurred sometime during King Ælfwald of East Anglia's reign between 713 and 749.[186] These five *vitae* are the only texts drafted for individuals who personally knew and interacted with some of the elite women discussed in this thesis, which makes any reference particularly important.

The importance of contemporary *vitae* does not, however, outweigh the information found in the later saints' *vitae*. This is not only because our extant female *vitae* survive from later periods, but also because it is probable that authors used sources which are no longer extant. This was certainly the case for John of Tynemouth who was an exhaustive hagiographer of the fourteenth century. We know that he traveled extensively to obtain sources necessary for constructing some 156 *vitae* in his *Sanctilogium Angliae, Walliae, Scotiae et Hiberniae*, later reorganised into the *Nova Legenda Anglie* (hereafter *NLA*).[187] Among the *vitae* used in this thesis that were collected by John of Tynemouth are SS Cyneburh, Cyneswith and Tibba. There are several more saints' *vitae* linked to the Mercian royal family in his collection, but there are earlier versions which I prefer to use over those produced by John of Tynemouth. He likely drew from these earlier hagiographers, certainly Bede, Goscelin of Saint-Bertin (c. 1040–after 1107), and William of Malmesbury (c. 1080–1143), but no investigation has been undertaken on the extent of material used in the construction of the *NLA*.[188]

Other later saints' *vitae* I drew upon are the compiled texts of the *Mildrith Legend*, those comprising the Ely saints, the *Liber Eliensis* (hereafter *LE*), the *vitae* of St. Osyth, and the *Vita S. Rumwoldi*.[189] The texts of the *Mildrith Legend*, examined by David Rollason, are the

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[185] Colgrave, ed., *Life of Wilfrid*, x–xi.

[186] The prologue claims it was written at his command. See: *VSG*, prologue (Colgrave, ed., 61). For more on Ælfwald and for a sample of literature concerning the *VSG*, see: Frank Stenton, "The East Anglian Kings of the Seventh Century," in *Preparatory*, ed. D. Stenton, 394–402; Stefany J. Wragg, "The Early Texts of the Cult of Saint Guthlac," *English Studies* 100, no. 3 (2019): 253–72.

[187] Despite the amount of saints' lives preserved in his *Sanctilogium*, little work has been done on these *vitae*. For more on John of Tynemouth and his hagiographies, see: Carl Horstman, ed., *Nova Legenda Anglie: As collected by John of Tynemouth, John Capgrave, and others, and first printed, with New Lives, by Wynkyn de Worde a.d mdxui*, Volume I and II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901); Michael Lapidge and Rosalind Love, "The Latin Hagiography of England and Wales (600–1550)," in *Corpvs Christianorvm*, Hagiographies III (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), 305–9; Virginia Blanton, "The Lost and (Not) Found Sources for Female Saints' Legends in John of Tynemouth's Sanctilogium," in *A Companion to British Literature*, ed. Robert DeMaria Jr., Heesok Chang and Samantha Zacher (New York: Wiley & Sons, 2014), 65–80.

[188] Lapidge and Love, "Latin Hagiography," 306.

[189] See: E.O. Blake, ed., *Liber Eliensis*, Camden Third Series, volume xcii (London: Royal Historical Society, 1962) and for a translation, Janet Fairweather, trans., *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely From the Seventh Century to the Twelfth* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005); David Rollason, *The Mildrith Legend: A Study in Early Medieval Hagiography in England* (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1982); Rosalind Love, ed., *Three Eleventh-Century Anglo-Latin Saints' Lives: Vita S. Birini, Vita et Miracula S. Kenelmi, Vita S. Rumwoldi*, OMT (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) and *Saints of Ely*; David Bethell, "The Lives of St Osyth of Essex and St Osyth of Aylesbury," *Analecta Bollandiana* 88

various *vitae* and legends in which St Mildrith of Minster-in-Thanet in Kent is found. While all surviving manuscripts range from the late-tenth to twelfth centuries, one text of the *Mildrith Legend* written at Ramsey in Huntingdonshire in the late tenth to early eleventh century, the *Passio sanctorum Ethelberti atque Ethelredi regiae stirpis puerorum*,[190] appears to be based on an earlier version composed possibly in the second quarter of the eighth-century.[191] Despite the *Mildrith Legend* originating at Minster-in-Thanet in Kent, Mildrith was Mercian and her sister, St Mildburh's *vita* is placed in Rollason's analysis of Mildrith. Unfortunately, Mildburh's *vita* remains nondigitised and unedited, a project beyond the scope of this thesis.[192]

Their Mercian relative, St. Wærburh, can be found in the *LE* and the various texts of the Ely saints (Æthelthryth, Seaxburh, Eormenhild, and Wihtburh) edited by Rosalind Love.[193] The *LE* survives in two manuscripts (Cambridge, Trinity College MS O.2.1 and Cambridge, UL, Ely Dean and Chapter MS: *Liber Eliensis*), the earliest of which (MS O.2.1) dates to the late twelfth century.[194] The anonymous author drew from earlier works, but he also included local sources from Ely which are harder to trace.[195] The other author of saints' *vitae* for Ely was the Flemish monk, Goscelin of Saint-Bertin.[196] Goscelin's earlier hagiographic endeavours at Ely and possibly Mildburh at Wenlock seem to have benefited many later authors which is testament to his contributions.[197] Yorke, examining later hagiographies, came to the conclusion that Goscelin, while he may embellish, never "added factual details of his own invention."[198] This said, the details found in Goscelin's productions, particularly the kinship connections of the early Mercian female saints, have a high likelihood of being based on information found in

(1970): 75–127; Jane Zatta, "The Life of St. Osith," *Papers on Language & Literature* 41, no. 3–4 (2005): 339–62.

[190] See: *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia: Historia Regum*, vol. 2, ed. Thomas Arnold (London: Longmans & Co., 1885), 3–13; Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 15–18.

[191] For a complete accounting of the texts which comprise the *Mildrith Legend*, see: Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 15–31. For the edited OE *vitae* found in London, BL, Cotton MS Caligula A.xiv and London, Lambeth Palace Library MS 427, see: Johanna Kramer, Hugh Magennis, and Robin Norris, ed. and trans., *Anonymous Old English Lives of Saints*, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2020), 454–67.

[192] The manuscript can be found in London, BL Add. MS 34,633, f. 206–9. I attempted to view this manuscript, but this was the week of the first cyber-attack on the British Library. All systems were down and my appointment was cancelled.

[193] Love, ed., *Saints of Ely* and Blake, ed., *LE*. For more on these saints, see: Paul Szarmach, ed., *Writing Women Saints in Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013); Tamara Sue Rand, "'And if Men Might also Imitate her Virtues' An Examination of Goscelin of Saint-Bertin's Hagiographies of the Female Saints of Ely and Their Role in the Creation of Historic Memory" (PhD diss., University of Akron, 2013).

[194] Blake, ed., *LE*, xxiii–iv.

[195] Ibid., xxviii–xlii.

[196] For more on Goscelin's prolific hagiographies, see: Lapidge and Love, *Latin Hagiography*, 225–33.

[197] Love, ed., *Saints of Ely*, xx–xxi; For Goscelin's links to Mildburh, see: Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 149 n. 60. For more on Goscelin, see: Elisabeth van Houts, "The Flemish Contribution to Biographical Writing in England in the Eleventh Century," in *Writing Medieval Biography*, ed. Bates, Crick and Hamilton, 111–28; Virginia Blanton, "The Kentish Queen as Omnium Mater: Goscelin of Saint-Bertin's Lections and the Emergence of the Cult of Saint Seaxburh," in *Writing Women Saints in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Paul Szarmach (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 191–214.

[198] Yorke, "Carriers of Truth," 53–4.

monastic archives made available to Goscelin. While later writers like Goscelin, John of Tynemouth and the complier of the *LE* based their hagiographies on previous *vitae* and archived details, SS Osyth and Rumwold suffer from later confusion and conflation.[199] Therefore, a consideration of the *vita*'s complier and purposes behind composition must be considered before acceptance of the information found in pre-Conquest saints' *vitae*.

1.4 — Structure of the Thesis

As I stated previously, this thesis is not a narrative history. Rather, it is comprised of case studies which attempt to highlight Mercian elite women and political action through the networks of Mercian elite women. In order to give context for this thesis, chapter two considers the political climate of seventh-century Mercia by focusing on kinship and alliance networks of the royal family. Mercia was one of the largest kingdoms in seventh-century England, stretching from the Brittonic-Welsh borderlands in the west, the Deiran borderlands (Humber River) in the north, the fens (East Anglia) in the east, and lastly the borderlands of Wessex to the south. Believed to originate somewhere in the Trent River valley, nascent Mercian expansion is witnessed during the first half of the seventh century under the rulership of Penda (r. 626/33–655). Much of this expansion assuredly occurred through aggressive militaristic action and alliance building. Unfortunately, many current explorations do not offer a comprehensive view of Mercian hegemony and its subkingdoms. Here, I consider structures of rulership, Mercian methods of rulership and Mercian interaction with surrounding kingdoms. This chapter combines disparate research to give historical context so that Mercian elite women can be returned to historical narratives of political action.

Chapter three builds off the historical context explored in chapter two. Delving into Mercian familial connections, chapter three focuses on how and why these various kinship networks were created through marriage or non-martial unions. Modern scholarship has an unfortunate pattern of elision which views early medieval marriages or unions as solely contracted for purposes of alliance. With the understanding of alliance being that of either political might over another weaker kingdom or ending conflict, this flattens our view of the complexity in which these unions took place. These martial unions are typically labelled as marriage alliances with the bride labelled as a 'peaceweaver', or *freoðowebbe*, with all its

[199] There are arguments whether there was a singular Osyth or two different women. I discuss this more in chapter four. See: Christopher Hohler, "St. Osyth and Aylesbury," *Records of Buckinghamshire* 18, no. 1 (1965): 61–72; R.P. Hagerty, "The Buckinghamshire Saints Reconsidered 2: St Osyth & St Edith of Aylesbury," *Records of Buckinghamshire* 29 (1987): 125–32. For an accounting of St Osyth's *vitae*, see: Denis Bethell, "The Lives of St Osyth of Essex and St Osyth of Aylesbury," *Analecta Bollandiana* 88 (1970): 75–127. For St Rumwold, see: Love, ed., *Three Eleventh-Century Lives*, cxl–clxxxvii and 91–115.

attendant associations. While Mercian marriages were certainly for political alliance, the circumstances surrounding some of these unions have underlying patterns which indicate deeper motives. In this chapter, I offer a poststructural look beyond that of the *freoðowebbe* which claims that brides were only used as peaceweaving mediators between two kingdoms, or used for a kingdom's show of strength over a less powerful political unit. Because of the nature of the sources, this chapter necessarily focuses on the patrilineal use of familial networks to create cultivated ties not only between kingdoms, but I propose, for personal gain as well.

Chapter four, the final chapter, focuses on the topographical placements of religious foundations and lands granted to Mercian elite women. The specific lands gifted by Mercian men and their placement in relation to the boundaries of the Mercian kingdom, allude to a political strategy which placed trusted elite women in positions where they could monitor borderlands and tributary kingdoms of Mercia. I show this through an analysis of granted lands found in extant charters which I then locate and map. This chapter shows that land donations to Mercian elite women were part of a broader strategy to assist the monitoring of Mercian lands which may have been newly acquired, held important resources, or were in precarious areas.

Chapter Two – The Historical Background of Seventh-Century Mercia: Mercia's Royal Family, Subkingdoms and *Imperium*

The seventh century was a time of nascent and rapid growth for the Mercian kingdom. From their core lands centred somewhere along the Trent River valley, Mercia began to expand outwards in all directions during Penda's reign. By the end of the seventh century, Mercia seems to have held *imperium* over the kingdoms of Lindsey in the north, the assortment of smaller political units labelled the Middle Angles to the east, Essex, Kent, the Hwicce, and the kingdoms bordering the Brittonic-Welsh in the west. This relatively rapid expansion of the Mercian kingdom, between 626 and 700, was the political climate in which the Mercian elite women found in this thesis operated. This political climate is also the underlying foundation of this thesis. So far, studies of seventh-century Mercia and its royal family's expansion of the kingdom have only focused on men's contributions and have omitted Mercian elite women as political actors for kingdom growth. My thesis will show in the coming chapters that Mercia appears to have had several tactics which attempted to mitigate the vicissitudes of expansion which included the women of the royal family. Before I can begin to reinsert these elite women back into the political landscape, however, it is best to offer an explanation of the political background of this time period for clarity.

The Mercian royal family's methods of expansion and forms of hegemonical control have received previous scholarly attention, which have certainly informed this chapter and thesis; but there are several key points that are particularly important. First, Mercian expansion under Penda was militaristic and aggressive, which, in one aspect, was an intensified traditional strategy responding to the adoption of incoming Christian political methods by rival kings.[200] Later, Penda's sons, while still militaristically formidable in their own right, would adopt these same Christian strategies which Penda had resisted. Despite this difference, both father and sons appear to have used a similar tactic in the application of *imperium* to their ruling strategy. I will explain how this chapter and thesis views the concept of *imperium* in a separate section below. However, it appears that the wider Mercian hegemony consisted of subsumed, yet functionally independent, smaller political units and their kings. Damian Tyler and others have argued that instead of suppressing and incorporating these smaller kingdoms, the seventh-century Mercian ruling family practiced *imperium* over subordinate territories by either allowing the previous royal family to rule, or selecting a

[200] Damian Tyler, "Orchestrated Violence and the 'Supremacy of the Mercian Kings'," in *Æthelbald and Offa: Two Eighth-Century Kings of Mercia. Papers from a Conference held in Manchester in 2000*, ed. David Hill and Margaret Worthington (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2005), 27–8.

chosen individual.[201] The Mercian overking, therefore, ruled over a loose confederation of subsumed political units, which were generally governed independently by local royal families or Mercian appointed administrative agents.[202] It is believed that some of these Mercian appointed positions of administrative rule in subsumed political units were given to other Mercian royal family members. This pattern was first briefly noticed by Barbara Yorke; in this chapter, I will be able to amplify her findings.[203] The second Mercian expansionary tactic, which goes beyond the militaristic and administrative aspect, is the possible control of economic and trade interests below the Humber River beginning in the last quarter of the seventh century.[204] These economic and trade interests become important when discussing land location and marriage in chapters three and four. However, without further archaeological investigations, evidence for Mercian economic expansion and control will be painstakingly assembled from scattered indications.

As the coming chapters will argue, Mercian elite women had active roles in the political agendas of elite men during the expansion of the Mercian kingdom. However, first I need to explain these masculine political agendas, and furthermore, describe the Mercian royal family who ruled during the seventh century. To this end, I will treat three main areas in this chapter: first, I survey and introduce the known members of the Mercian royal family. Second, I explore the concept of *imperium* and how the Mercian family chose to rule the kingdom. After this, I will continue the discussion by analysing the potential extent of familial connections to the Mercian royal family in the subkingdoms under their *imperium*. This extends Yorke's work that I mentioned above. After this, the final section elucidates the political climate of the seventh century and how Mercia interacted with other major kingdoms in pre-Conquest England. All three topics establish the context for understanding the political world in which elite women operated and functioned.

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[201] For key literature, see: Stenton, *Preparatory*, 48–66; Simon Keynes, "Mercia and Wessex in the Ninth Century," in *Mercia*, ed. Brown and Farr, 314 and "The Kingdom of the Mercians in the Eighth Century," in *Æthelbald and Offa*, ed. Hill and Worthington, 1–7; Tyler, "Orchestrated Violence," in *Æthelbald and Offa*, ed. Hill and Worthington, 27–33.

[202] Simon Keynes, "Mercia and Wessex in the Ninth Century," in *Mercia*, ed. Brown and Farr, 314. This system of governance has been blamed for the 'collapse' of Mercia at the end of the ninth century, but this is likely a misinterpretation based in local variations of perception. See: Morn Capper, "Titles and Troubles: Conceptions of Mercian Royal Authority in Eighth-and Ninth-Century Charters," in *Problems and Possibilities*, ed. Jarrett and McKinley, 223–25; Charles Insley, "Collapse, Reconfiguration or Renegotiation? The Strange End of the Mercian Kingdom, 850–924," *Reti Medievali Rivista* 17, no. 2 (2016): 231–49.

[203] Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 107–8.

[204] J.R. Maddicott convincingly argued for Mercian economic control of the salt trade during the last quarter of the seventh century. See: "London and Droitwich, c.650–750: trade, industry and the rise of Mercia," *ASE* 34 (2005): 7–58.

2.1 – The Mercian Royal Family of the Seventh Century: Mythic Beginnings, Kings and Children

In this section, I detail the Mercian rulers of the seventh century and their family members who are crucial for understanding later chapters in which elite women become the focus. Here, I will briefly explain known Mercian royal family members — as reconstructed from my genealogical database — for the period just before the beginning of Penda's reign in 626, through the end of the seventh century.[205] I begin with pre-seventh-century Mercian family members mainly because these are the individuals that later rulers would connect themselves to as a means of legitimising their rule. Additionally, these early Mercian rulers would produce collateral branches of the Mercian royal family whose members can occasionally be glimpsed in the sources. I will end the section with the children of Penda who would become the ruling elite of Mercia and its *imperium* through the end of the seventh century.

Discerning the rulers and royal family of seventh-century Mercia requires an exacting investigation. I begin this discussion with the earliest traceable family member detailed in not only the *Royal Genealogies* but also the *VSG*. Both of these sources claim that common descent of the Mercian paternal branch can be traced from a man named Icel. The *Royal Genealogies* show all the major ruling Mercian royal branches headed by Penda, Æthelbald, Offa and Coenwulf as originating from Icel's line.[206] The names which precede Icel in the genealogies, like his father Eomer and Eomer's predecessors, appear to be all continental names of mythic origin.[207] Thus, it is believed that Icel was the first continental Anglian to arrive in Britain and place-name evidence seems to confirm his arrival.[208] The OE *VSG* confirms Icel as a founding member of the Mercian royal line, and also establishes the eponymous Mercian family name of *Iclingas*.[209]

But if Icel can be securely linked to the Mercian royal line in Britain, when did he arrive and begin to rule? Dating is inconclusive, but some estimates have been attempted. Wendy

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[205] Penda's estimated regnal dating is problematic because the sources are inconsistent, but I have chosen to follow 626 as the start of Penda's reign. See footnote 230.
[206] The *ASC* restates the Icel descent in the 626 entry: *ASC* A 626 (ed. Bately, 28); Dumville, "Anglian collection," 31.
[207] See: Kenneth Sisam, "Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies," *PBA* 39 (1953): 306–7 and 329; Yorke, "Origins of Mercia," in *Mercia*, ed. Brown and Farr, 15–18.
[208] Nicholas Brooks has associated Icel with Ickleton in Cambridgeshire, Ickleford in Hertfordshire, and Icklesham in Sussex. See: "The formation of the Mercian kingdom," in *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. Steven Bassett (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1989), 164.
[209] The OE version of the *VSG* is where the name *Iclingas* first appears, and despite it being a late source, Bede's *HE* supports this claim by showing that other family names could be derived thus. See: *AOELS*, 146–47; Bede, *HE* ii.5 and 15. Also see: Wendy Davies, "Annals and the origin of Mercia," in *Mercian Studies*, ed. Ann Dornier (London: Leicester UP, 1977), 23; Brooks, "Formation of Mercia," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 163.

Davies in her examination of post-Conquest annalistic materials, such as Henry of Huntingdon, Roger of Wendover, and Matthew Paris, estimates Icel's reign to be sometime between c. 510–535.[210] Nicholas Brooks pushes this date as far back as c. 450. He bases his estimate of Icel's reign on the problematic dating of Penda's reign and the premise of a twenty-five-to-thirty-year generational cycle.[211] Despite the validity of both these issues, I am more inclined to follow Davies dating given the militaristic lifestyle of these rulers which frequently shortened their lives and subsequently their reigns.

Thus, from the dynasty's progenitor Icel, subsequent Mercian rulers claiming descent can be traced using the *Royal Genealogies* and further place-name evidence potentially confirms the existence of these subsequent rulers. This list of Mercian rulers from Icel, as given by the genealogies, are: Cnebba – Cynewald – Creoda – Pybba – Penda.[212] Scattered place-names can be located for Cnebba — Knebworth in Hertfordshire, just north of London — and Cynewald — Kinwalsey in Warwickshire near Birmingham.[213] However, these two examples remain the only possible evidence outside of the genealogies for the presence of these two Mercian rulers. Other place-names for Creoda, Pybba, and Penda are curiously concentrated in the West Midlands and along the southern edge of the Midlands.[214] This is unusual because the accepted original core, prior to Penda's expansion of the Mercian kingdom has traditionally centred on the Trent River valley.[215] This peculiarity could indicate early nascent expansion of Mercia, but caution should be exercised when utilising place-name evidence to make any definitive statements. There are some that suspect Creoda made an appearance in *ASC* 593, but this is likely confusion on the part of West Saxon annalists for

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[210] Davies, "Annals," 23.
[211] Brooks, "Formation of Mercia," 163.
[212] This is the same list given in Sisam and witnessed in Dumville's study of the genealogies: Sisam, "Royal Genealogies," 329 and Dumville, "Anglian genealogies," 30–37.
[213] Brooks, "Formation of Mercia," 164.
[214] First noticed in 1927, this has been expanded by Brooks. According to Brooks, place-names associated with Creoda are: Credenhill in Herefordshire and Wiltshire, Curbridge in Oxfordshire, Curdworth in Warwickshire, and Kersoe and *Creodan Ac* both of which are in Worcestershire. The place-names associated with Pybba are: Publow in Somerset, three villages in Worcestershire (Pedmore, Pepper Wood, and Pepwell), and Peplow in Shropshire. See: Allen Mawer, Frank Stenton, and Frederick Houghton, *The place-names of Worcestershire*, English Place-Name Society (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1927), xxii; Brooks, "Formation of Mercia," 163–4.
[215] The Trent River flows across the whole of the Midlands beginning in Staffordshire and eventually making its way into the river Ouse before terminating in the Humber Estuary. The traditional understanding of the Mercian core being centred on the Trent River valley is derived from Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 294–5), where he asserts that the North Mercians were divided from the South Mercians by this particular river after the battle of *Winwæd* by the victor King Oswiu. However, the term for Mercian, *Mierce* (or, *Merci*), translates to "the borderers" but the significance underlying this name is unknown. Who were the Mercians bordering before the seventh century? Some have hypothesised the western British, while others have suggested that the name it an older pre-kingdom name form. See: Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971), 40; Brooks, "Formation of the Mercia," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 160; Patrick Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600–800* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 16–7; Margaret Gelling, *The West Midlands in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1992), 79–80.

the West Saxon Creoda (Crida).[216] What is certain, is that Penda's father Pybba was the progenitor for the ruling branches of the Mercian royal family during the seventh century. Therefore, I will continue my reconstruction of the Mercian royal family with Pybba, Penda's father and grandfather to Penda's children, because there is evidence he had multiple children who established collateral branches of the Mercian royal family.

The details of Pybba's career have been lost to time, so we cannot reconstruct any detail of his life beyond that he reportedly had twelve sons.[217] Only three out of these twelve sons are named: Eowa (Eobba), Penda, and Cenwalh (or Coenwalh).[218] Eowa fought alongside Penda and fell at the battle of *Maserfelth* in 642 where Penda killed Oswald of Northumbria.[219] This detail has led some to believe that Eowa was Penda's predecessor based on the problematic dating of Penda's succession to the Mercian throne. The *ASC* gives Penda's succession date as 626 with Penda being fifty years of age and reigning for thirty.[220] However, Bede claims he did not succeed until *Hæthfelth* in 633 and the *HB* claims an even later date, which is sometime after *Maserfelth* with Penda only reigning ten years.[221] Nicholas Brooks successfully handles this confusion. He claims that 626 is the correct accession date but that the chronicler misapplied figures from the original source.[222] To further back 626 as Penda's accession, the *ASC* mentions Penda fighting against West Saxon rulers at Cirencester in 628, which I will discuss in a following section. Establishing the beginning of Penda's reign is important here because he is a main component of this thesis and many of his actions directed the political happenings of the period between 626 and 655 which are discussed in this chapter.

Determining Penda's succession date does not, however, explain Eowa's position in Mercia. Without further information we can only speculate, but it seems likely that Penda and Eowa were either co-rulers of Mercia, or Eowa was a subking for the Mercian kingdom. While Brooks acknowledges that Eowa was ruling in some capacity, he aligns Eowa as a subking of Oswald; thus, Eowa's death was not beside but against his brother.[223] Barbara Yorke offers a different view by proposing that Eowa was a subking of the Wreocenscæte, a small

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[216] *ASC* A 593 (ed. Bately, 25). See: Davies, "Annals," 22; Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Routledge, 1990), 102.
[217] *HB*, ch. 60 (ed. Morris, 36–7).
[218] Cenwalh would be named and used to legitimise later ninth-century Mercian rulers. See: Dumville, "Anglia Royal Genealogies," 33 and 37.
[219] Welsh sources name this battle as Cogwy. *HB* ch. 65 (ed. Morris, 39); *Annales Cambriae* 644 (ed. Morris, 46); Bede, *HE* iii.9 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 240–43).
[220] *ASC* A 626 (ed. Bately, 28). The *ASC* claims Penda was fifty when he took the throne and that he reigned for thirty years. This is obviously erroneous because that would make Penda eighty when he died in battle at *Winwæd*. For this reason, these numbers are surely a compiler's error and the accurate numbers have been switched or mistranscribed in some way. See: Brooks, "Formation of Mercia," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 165–66.
[221] Bede, *HE* ii.20 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 203) and *HB* ch. 65 (ed. Morris, 39).
[222] Brooks, "Formation of Mercia," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 166.
[223] Ibid., 166–67.

subkingdom to the west of Mercia.[224] I am more inclined to follow Yorke's supposition because, as I will explore in this chapter, the Mercian ruling family often placed sons in authoritative/ administrative roles throughout the expanded hegemony.

But before I move onto a discussion of Penda's children, I must address a Mercian king named Cearl (Ceorl),[225] a mysterious figure found only in the *HE*.[226] It is important to discuss his potential familial connections here because Cearl's daughter, Cwenburh, would form a relationship with a Deiran prince and exile, which I will discuss extensively in chapter three. Cearl only appears in a single sentence in which Bede explains that King Edwin of Deira (c. 586–633) had a relationship with Cearl's daughter, Cwenburh, the mother of two of Edwin's sons, Eadfrith and Osfrith. Bede labels Cearl as king of the Mercians. This has caused speculation that Cearl was Mercia's reigning king during Edwin's forced exile thought to be between c. 604–617; but as I show later, Edwin's exile could possibly have started much earlier.[227]

This thought that Cearl was the main ruler of Mercia would place Pybba in a subsidiary branch of the royal family. I do not believe this is the case as Pybba's name appears in the *Royal Genealogies* as part of the root branch.[228] This is contra to Nicholas Higham who argues that because Cearl was able to contract Cwenburh's marriage to Edwin without another king's approval, Cearl was the overking of Mercia. However, Higham fails to consider two further points. First, Cearl does not appear in other sources including the genealogies: Royal, Brittonic, or annalistic. Additionally, the later post-Conquest annalistic mentions of Cearl are likely due to authors' historiographic endeavours to reconcile the early sources.[229] While silence does not always indicate absence, it is unusual that compliers of the genealogies did not attempt to reconcile the sources like the later annalists.

The second point which Higham did not consider, is an incident in the *HE* which I find is suggestive of a kinship-based relationship between Cearl and Pybba. While describing Edwin's final battle at *Hæthfelth* against Penda, Bede states that Eadfrith had deserted his father, Edwin, because he was compelled to join Penda's forces before the battle. Osfrith,

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[224] Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 108.
[225] The name 'Ceorl' is suspicious because the OE term *ceorl* indicates a 'freeman' status in pre-Conquest England. For more on the status of a *ceorl*, see: John Hines, "Social structures and social change in seventh-century England: the law codes and complementary sources," *Historical Research* 86, no. 233 (2013): 394–407. Higham, as opposed to Sims-Williams, does not believe that Ceorl's name was meant to be derogatory. See: Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literaure*, 25; Nicholas Higham, "King Cearl, the Battle of Chester and the Origins of the Mercian 'Overkingship'," *Midland History* 17, no. 1 (1992): no. 3.
[226] Bede, *HE* ii.14 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 186–87).
[227] See chapter three.
[228] See: Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971), 38–9; Nicholas Higham, *An English empire: Bede and the early Anglo-Saxon kings* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995), 79 and "King Cearl," 4.
[229] Wendy Davies attributes Cearl's addition to a common lost source used by the post-Conquest authors in her study: "Annals".

Eadfrith's brother, chose to remain with his father and both were later killed during the same battle.[230] Eadfrith's maternity may indicate this 'compelling' (*cogens*) factor used by Penda to convince Eadfrith to abandon his father and join Mercian forces. This leads to my hypothesis that Cearl was either a Mercian subking or co-ruler with Pybba rather than the Mercian overking holding *imperium*. I suspect Cearl was connected to the ruling branch of the Mercian royal family, possibly as Pybba's brother. To have a daughter of age to form a union and have children with Edwin, it is simply not possible for Cearl to be part of Penda's generation (such as a brother or cousin). Without further evidence it must remain speculative, but this would explain Bede's claim that Cearl was a Mercian king and Eadfrith's strange desertion to Penda's army for the battle of *Hæthfelth* in which his father and brother both died. This discussion of Cearl's possible kinship and his status within the Mercian kingdom will become important later in chapter three.

With other members of the Mercian ruling family discussed, I now move to Penda's immediate family who are the main concern of this thesis. So far, this discussion has illustrated that Mercia potentially had many royal branches throughout the seventh century; but only Penda's line would become the dominant branch. Because Penda's familial line would dominate throughout the seventh century, and also because they frequently appeared within the pages of the *HE*, tracing his line is easier than previous generations. Our earliest sources have Penda fathering four sons and two daughters: Peada, Wulfhere, Æthelred, Merewalh, Cyneburh, and Cyneswith.[231] Later post-Conquest *vitae* add more daughters to this list: Eadgyth, Eadburh, and Wilburh.[232] Penda's familial connections along with his children are illustrated in figure 2.1.

If the number of listed children is any indication, Penda's queen named by Bede, Cynewise, was likely not his only partner.[233] This is potentially supported with the diverse naming patterns of Penda's children. Cyneburh and Cyneswith certainly share a first naming element with Cynewise which can indicate that these two women were her daughters. While Eadgyth and Eadburh also share a first naming element, their names do not alliterate with Penda nor Cynewise. The same is true for Wulfhere and Wilburh, who share an alliterative 'W'. This possibly suggests that Cynewise was not the mother of these four children, which indicates Penda either had multiple partners or practiced serial monogamy. However,

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[230] Bede, *HE* ii.20 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 202–3).
[231] All are attested in the *HE* except for Merewalh and Cyneswith. Merewalh appears in the *Mildrith Legend* and the *Vita Mildburgae*. Cyneswith appears alongside her sister Cyneburh in *þa Secgan*, their *vita* documented by John of Tynemouth, and a fabricated foundation charter for Peterborough Abbey. For more, see chapter four.
[232] These three daughters and their offspring are briefly discussed in chapter four.
[233] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 290–1).

differences in names alone cannot discount that Cynewise was the mother to all Penda's children. Without further evidence, this will have to remain unknown.

The timeline for succession in seventh-century Mercia is a bit muddled due to the royal family's unique method of ruling, which will shortly be discussed further; but here I outline a brief sketch of Mercian rulers during and after Penda's reign. Penda ruled Mercia as overking until his death in 655 at the battle of *Winwæd*. During his reign, Peada and Merewalh ruled the subkingdoms of the Middle Angles and the Magonsæte, respectively.[234] Immediately after Penda's death, Peada continued to rule South Mercia with the consent of King Oswiu of Bernicia (c. 611/12–670), with Oswiu taking control of North Mercia.[235] The splintering of the kingdom was brief, lasting until the next spring (656), when Peada was reportedly poisoned by his wife Alhflæd at the Easter celebration. After this event, Oswiu claimed *imperium* over the whole kingdom of Mercia. What remains unknown is whether Merewalh retained his position as subking of the Magonsæte during Oswiu's *imperium*, but it is possible. In 658, three Mercian nobles, Immin, Eafa, and Eadberht, successfully rebelled against Oswiu and placed Penda's son Wulfhere on the throne.[236] Wulfhere ruled Mercia from 658 until his death in 675 and was succeeded by Penda's youngest son Æthelred. He ruled until his abdication in 704, which brings us to the end of the period discussed in this thesis.[237]

These ruling men of Mercia were the individuals that Mercian elite women called father, brother, or husband. They were also the men that dictated through patriarchal bounds how the women of this thesis acted: whether a feminine political action would be supported or forced to become subversive. With the ruling family members of seventh-century Mercia discussed and established, I will now begin the examination of the political context, including an explanation of the Mercian form of *imperium* in the seventh century. This will reveal both the masculine political landscape and geographical areas which Mercian elite women navigated throughout their lives.

2.2 – How Did Mercia Rule? Modern Conceptions of *Imperium* and the Bretwalda

It is important to this chapter and thesis that I briefly discuss the concept of *imperium* and how scholars have typically viewed Mercia's style of *imperium* because the elite women

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[234] Bede, *HE* iii.21 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 278–9) and *Vita Mildburge* ch. 6. For more on the Magonsæte, see: Kate Pretty, "Defining the Magonsæte," in *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. Steven Bassett (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1989), 171–83 and H.P.R. Finberg, *ECWM*, 217–24.
[235] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 294–5). South Mercia is described by Bede as 5,000 hides divided from North Mercia (7,000 hides) by the river Trent.
[236] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 294–5).
[237] Bede, *HE* v.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 566–7).

found in this thesis frequently lived and operated in areas considered to be under Mercian control during the seventh century. The term *imperium* and its modern conceptual understanding have explicitly or implicitly framed scholars' understanding of early pre-Conquest kingship, and in turn the understanding of a queen's role (typically, as a tool for alliance) in this system. The modern significance accorded to *imperium* has been used to explain the vicissitudes of early kingship, a king's power, and overall, pre-Conquest politics. For this reason, it is necessary to briefly explain the development of our modern ideas of *imperium*, and the associated pre-Conquest role of the *bretwalda*, to ground the remaining chapters and for clarification on my use of particular terms.

The concept of *imperium*, and its associated ties with overlordship and the role of the *bretwalda*, has been the subject of vast amounts of scholarship.[238] However, the general acceptance of the modern concept of *imperium* — a ruler which practiced wide-ranging overlordship over the kingdoms of early pre-Conquest England — leads to problems when attempting to define conceptual structures of rulership. Mainly, how far did a ruler's influence and power truly extend? This is a problematic question to answer, as my discussion of power in the introduction illustrated with regard to medieval elite women. Studies of overlordship have generally linked Bede's list of kings in the *HE* said to hold *imperium* and other combined sources to support modern perceptions.[239] Conflating mentions of *imperium*, *bretwaldan* and *subreguli* within extant sources, scholars have reified these terms into an idea of a wide-ranging overlordship.[240] The general hypothesis can be summarised thus: kings claiming the

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[238] For an example of classic literature concerning overlordship in the traditional sense, see: Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971); Eric John, "'Orbis Britanniae' and the Anglo-Saxon Kings," in *Orbis Britanniae and Other Studies*, ed. Eric John (London: Leicester UP, 1966), 1–63; Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Routledge, 1990); David Dumville, "The Terminology of Overkingship in Early Anglo-Saxon England," in *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century – An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. John Hines (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), 345–65; Ann Williams, *Kingship and Government in Pre-Conquest England, c.500– 1066* (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 1999).

[239] Reference to *imperium* takes place rather early in book two, chapter five of the *HE* as a list of kings that had claimed this special status. This list includes four kings from the southern kingdoms: Ælle, king of the South Saxons; Cælin/Ceawlin, king of the West Saxons; Æthelberht, king of Kent; and Rædwald, king of the East Angles. However, the last three are from Northumbrian kingdoms: Edwin, Oswald, and Oswiu. Later, the *ASC* added King Ecgberht, King Alfred's grandfather, to Bede's list causing a plethora of issues in determining the landscape of early pre-Conquest kingship: Bede, *HE* ii.5 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 148–9). Wormald succinctly breaks down past arguments, see: Patrick Wormald, "Bede, the *Bretwaldas* and the Origins of the *Gens Anglorum*," in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society Studies presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill*, ed. Patrick Wormald, Donald Bullough and Roger Collins (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 100–15.

[240] For a sample of studies explaining and assuming an overkingship (*bretwalda*), see: Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*; John, "'Orbis Britanniae," in *Orbis Britanniae*, ed. John, 1–63; Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Routledge, 1990); David Dumville, "The Terminology of Overkingship in Early Anglo-Saxon England," in *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century – An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. John Hines (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), 345–73; Williams, *Kingship and Government*. Barbara Yorke observes that early Mercia was likely composed of a core kingdom ruling over smaller, satellite kingdoms. Tyler later supports this argument: Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 107–11; Damian Tyler, "An Early Mercian Hegemony: Penda and Overkingship in the Seventh Century," *Midland History* 30, n. 1 (2005): 1–19.

position of the *bretwalda* held individual power, or *imperium*/overlordship, over other kingdoms in Britain for extended periods until either a rival king wrested control from them, or they died. This definition elides Bede's original use of the term *imperium* with later ninth-century uses of the term *bretwalda*. But depending on the meaning of these various terms, this could be a question of misidentification.[241] Furthermore, it seems likely that Bede intentionally omitted Mercian rulers from his *imperium* list despite Mercian kings clearly holding substantial influence over a wide area. These issues have brought criticism to ideas of a singular overlord, the *Bretwalda*, with wide-ranging *imperium*, or rulership, over the pre-Conquest kingdoms.[242]

The uncertainty surrounding *imperium* and the position of the *bretwalda* have led more scholars to question modern conceptual assumptions of pre-Conquest overlordship. Patrick Wormald and Steven Fanning were among the first to question these ideas. Wormald, exploring the *bretwalda* and the concept of a *gens Anglorum*, concluded that ultimately the idea of a single powerful overlord was a construct originally envisioned by the Church which promoted the ideal of the *gens Anglorum*, a united English people.[243] Fanning took this further. He concluded that Bede used *imperium* much like its continental usage, which held that an "*imperium* was a *regnum* comprising a plurality of peoples, lands, or kingdoms; it was not merely rule or sovereignty in a general sense."[244] Agreeing with Yorke and Keynes, Fanning determined there is no evidence supporting the traditional understanding of a *bretwalda*,

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[241] This difficulty originates from the *ASC* A 839 glossing *bretwalda* (*brytenwalda*) for Bede's *imperium*. Only *ASC* A has the form *bretwalda*, with the other manuscripts B–F showing another *brytenwalda*, with minor variations. The differences between the translation of these two differing forms, *brytenwalda* or 'wide ruler' / 'emperor' and *bretwalda* or 'Britain ruler', possibly indicates the later compiler of the *ASC* was unfamiliar with *brytenwalda* and changed it to the more familiar term 'Britain ruler'. Sarah Foot believes that Bede had intended a 'wide-ranging kind of power' with his use of *imperium*, but the compiler of the *ASC* was likely referring to an actual office. This becomes more likely when considering that the *ASC* was first compiled during King Alfred's reign at the end of the ninth century when West Saxon rulers had a vision of a consolidated kingdom. See: Steven Fanning, "Bede, Imperium, and the Bretwaldas," *Speculum* 66, no.1 (1991): 22–24; Barbara Yorke, "The Vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon Overlordship," *Anglo-Saxon studies in archaeology and history*, BAR, 2 (1981): 172–3; Patrick Wormald, "Bede, the *Bretwaldas* and the Origins of the *Gens Anglorum*," in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill*, ed. Patrick Wormald with Donald Bullough and Roger Collins (Oxford, 1983), 107; John, "'Orbis Britanniae" in *Orbis Britanniae*, ed. John, 7–8; Sarah Foot, "The Making of *Angelcynn*: English Identity Before the Norman Conquest," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6 (1996): 40–41, no. 65; Kathrin McCann, *Anglo-Saxon Kingship and Political Power:* Rex Gratia Dei (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018): 64.

[242] Bede alludes to King Æthelbald of Mercia's *imperium* over the southern kingdoms in the closing chapters of the *HE* even if he does not explicitly call it *imperium*. See: Bede, *HE* v.23 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 558–9). For a more recent discussion on the excision of Mercian rulers from the *bretwaldan* lists, see: Barbara Yorke, "The *Bretwaldas* and the origins of overlordship in Anglo-Saxon England," in *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald*, ed. Stephen Baxter, Catherine Karkov, Janet Nelson and David Pelteret (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 189–91.

[243] Wormald, "Bede, *Bretwaldas*".

[244] The classical definition of *imperium* is either a command or order, whereas *regnum* can be defined as royal authority, kingship, or kingly government. These definitions, as Fanning argues, gain context when used in certain ways. See: Charlton Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary: Founded on Andrews' Edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), 900–1; Steven Fanning, "Bede, Imperium, and the Bretwaldas," *Speculum* 66, no.1 (1991): 14.

either as an office or as a status.[245] The traditional ideal of a *bretwalda* practicing *imperium* over all kingdoms south of the Humber is incorrect and ahistorical.[246] It is increasingly accepted that a number of powerful kings concurrently practiced wide-ranging *imperium* over smaller kingdoms and groups of people, without a formal office or title of overlordship.[247] My thesis accepts this view of *imperium* and it highlights that Mercian strategies of expansion did not necessarily include the unification of England under a *bretwalda*.

2.3 – The Mercian Hegemony: Subkingdoms of Mercia

The Mercian royal family practiced a wide-ranging *imperium* over a vast network of kingdoms during the seventh century. Controlled by one of the overkings or co-rulers described above, this Mercian hegemonical system was bolstered by placing subkings or regional officials into constituent kingdoms to assist the governance of that region. This section will show, oftentimes, a chosen subking or regional official shared familial links to the Mercian royal family, whether biological or affinal. This pattern in Mercian rulership was first noticed by Barbara Yorke, but my thesis extends 'officials' to include scholarship's excluded Mercian elite women in active political roles.[248] But which pre-Conquest kingdoms fell under Mercian rule, in what region were they located, and who was the subking for this political unit? In this section, I will identify and locate the various Mercian subkingdoms for which evidence remains. I will also examine which Mercian royal family member, if indeed this was the case, ruled as a subking or as a Mercian official in these areas. This will help to clarify later chapters by showcasing the (sub)kingdoms and familial branches from which Mercian elite women originated or married into.

I begin my exploration of subkingdoms and areas in which the Mercian royal family held *imperium* with the document entitled the Tribal Hidage.[249] I do this because not only does the Tribal Hidage offer a convenient framework from which to work, it also contains the names of certain political units that appear in no other extant source. This document, appearing in

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[245] Fanning, "Bede, Imperium," 26; Yorke, "Vocabulary," 184; Simon Keynes, "Rædwald the Bretwalda," in *Voyage to the Other World: The Legacy of Sutton Hoo*, ed. Calvin B. Kendall and Peter S. Wells (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 103–24.
[246] For example, see: Higham, *An English Empire: Bede and the Early Anglo-Saxon Kings* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995); David Dumville, "The terminology of overkingship in early Anglo-Saxon England," in *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. J. Hines (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), 345–65; Sarah Foot, "The Making of *Angelcynn*: English Identity Before the Norman Conquest," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6 (1996): 51–78; Morn Capper, "Titles and Troubles: Conceptions of Mercian Royal Authority in Eighth- and Ninth-Century Charters," in *Problems and Possibilities of Early Medieval Charters*, ed. Jonathan Jarrett and Allan McKinley (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 209–29.
[247] Yorke, "The *Bretwaldas*," 185–6.
[248] Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 107–9.
[249] For example: Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 295–97; Steven Bassett, "In search of the origins of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms," in *Origins*, 17–19; Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 9–15.

both an OE and Latin version, is considered a listing of early political units/kingdoms and their associated amounts of land compiled for what is thought to be the purpose of tribute payments.[250] These two features of the Tribal Hidage (kingdom and associated hide amounts) are where the document derives its modern name. However, the Tribal Hidage is a problematic source. The earliest recension has been dated to the first half of the eleventh century, while other recensions survive in much later transcripts.[251] Nevertheless, most scholars agree that the Tribal Hidage shows signs of originating from much earlier material. How early is debated. Scholars generally date its origins to sometime during the seventh century, with some arguing this can be as early as King Edwin's reign (r. 616–633). Others disagree with a seventh-century date and place it in the late eighth century during King Offa's reign (r. 757–796).[252]

This discrepancy in dating between either King Edwin or Offa highlights additional arguments which concern the shadowy origins of the Tribal Hidage. General consensus gives the document a Mercian origin based on the absence of the kingdom of Northumbria and smaller political units north of the Humber.[253] However, arguments can also be made for a Northumbrian origin based on this same absence.[254] I lean towards Davies and Vierck's dating for the Tribal Hidage being a production of the last half of the seventh century to the beginning of the eighth, which effectively places its construction occurring sometime during the reign of Wulfhere, Æthelred, or Æthelbald (r. 716–757).[255] Furthermore, while a Northumbrian origin is certainly possible, I find a Mercian construction more believable due to the document's focus on political units below the Humber. This origin is supported by the Mercian dominance in this area during the suggested periods of composition and the appearance of unknown political units in this same region. The appearance of larger kingdoms, such as Wessex, East Anglia, and Kent, which are generally considered kingdoms that remained independent of Mercian oversight, can be attributed to later interpolation. Despite being a laconic and troublesome source, the Tribal Hidage is beneficial for

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[250] Both Latin and OE lists have been transcribed in several studies. For example: J. Brownbill, "The Tribal Hidage," *The English Historical Review* 27, no. 108 (1912): 626; Cyril Hart, "The Tribal Hidage," *TRHS* 21 (1971): 134; David Dumville, "Tribal Hidage," in *Origins*, 225–30; Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 10. For a discussion on the existing manuscripts, see: Wendy Davies and Hayo Vierck, "The Contexts of Tribal Hidage: Social Aggregates and Settlement Patterns," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 8, no. 1 (1974): 288–92.
[251] David Dumville, "The Tribal Hidage: an introduction to its texts and their history," in *Origins*, 225.
[252] For a seventh-century authorship, see: Brownbill, "Tribal Hidage," 629–30; Davies and Vierck, "Tribal Hidage," 226–27; Higham, *English empire*, 99; Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 10. Stenton and Whitelock give a more inclusive range from Wulfhere to Offa: Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 297; *EHD*, ed. Whitelock, 9. For a late eighth century origin, see: Hart, "Tribal Hidage," 133.
[253] For example: Brownbill, "Tribal Hidage," 629; Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 296; Dumville, "Essex, Middle Anglia, and the expansion of Mercia in the South-East Midlands," in *Origins*, 129; Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 10 and 106–7.
[254] See: Brooks, "Formation," in *Origins*, 167–68; Higham, *An English empire*, 74–111.
[255] Davies and Vierck, "Tribal Hidage," 227.

envisioning the political makeup and hegemony of seventh-century Mercia. I have included a map of the Tribal Hidage's political units in figure 2.2.

Some of the listed political units found in this document can be identified, located, and given a general timeframe for (possible) submission to Mercia — whatever form that took — or political creation. Starting with the kingdom of Mercia itself, the Tribal Hidage lists the core of Mercia as 30,000 hides and this core, as I have mentioned, has generally been located around the area of the Trent River valley.[256] The given number of hides differs from Bede's given amount of 12,000, but 30,000 could reflect post-655 additions to these core lands.[257] Yorke noticed that from this core of lands, the ruling family of Mercia appears to have created a buffer zone from larger kingdoms utilising smaller polities in the surrounding areas.[258] To the north, the kingdoms of Pecsæte, Elmet, and Lindsey created a zone between Mercia proper and the kingdoms of Northumbria. Between Mercia and East Anglia were the numerous smaller political units which comprised the created subkingdom of the Middle Angles. Between Mercia, Wessex and Kent to the south were the Hwicce and possibly the Cliternsæte, which was also considered part of the Middle Angles.[259] To the west were the kingdoms of the Magonsæte (Westerna) and Wreocensæte (Wocen sætna).[260] Much like the Tribal Hidage this section flows in a clockwise direction. Hence why I begin with the westernmost subkingdoms in this discussion of the Mercian hegemony.

The Wreocensæte and Magonsæte

I will begin with one of Mercia's more mysterious subkingdoms, and one whose suspected location features throughout this thesis. The kingdom of the Wreocensæte is known to us only through its inclusion in the Tribal Hidage which sets the hidage amount of the kingdom at 7,000, making this a fairly significant political unit. Using topographical indicators, scholars have been able to locate the Wreocensætan slightly northwest of Mercia. These particular indicators are the Wrekin, a hill in modern Shropshire, and the Roman city of Wroexeter, which lies due west of the Wrekin with an approximate distance of six miles.[261] These two points were surely not centrally located. Much Wenlock, a town associated with and

[256] See footnote 174 above.
[257] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 295).
[258] Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 106–7.
[259] For more on placement of the Cilternsætan, see: Hart, "Tribal Hidage," 137 and 151; Davies and Vierck, "Tribal Hidage," 233.
[260] *Westerna*'s identification with Magonsæte is contested. For an identification with *Westerna*, see: Hart, "Tribal Hidage," 139–41; Pretty, "Defining the Magonsæte," 181. For identification with the Cheshire area, see: Stenton, *Anglo-England Saxon*, 296; Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 18; Gelling, *West Midlands*, 83–5.
[261] Hart, "The Tribal Hidage," 139.

found in the Magonsætan kingdom, lies only eleven miles to the south. Due to the proximity of Much Wenlock and the given 7,000 hides attributed with the Wreocensæte, it is argued that the kingdom pushed north well into modern Cheshire and included the Roman city of *Caerlegion* (Chester).[262] Therefore, the Wreocensætan kingdom extended from Wroexeter in the south up to *Caerlegion* in the north.

Beyond the general proposed topography, only speculative observations can be made about this kingdom's connections to Mercia. The first observation is that sometime between 613–615 the first attested battle between the Britons and Bernicians took place at *Caerlegion* in the proposed northern reaches of the Wreocensætan kingdom.[263] King Æthelfrith of Bernicia (d. 616) had gathered a large force and attacked the city, slaying around 1,200 praying men whose deaths Bede attributes to wickedness.[264] Why Æthelfrith attacked *Caerlegion* is unknown, but I explore the potential possibilities in the next section. What is pertinent here, is that Britons oversaw *Caerlegion*. This could indicate that the Welsh-Brittonic kingdom of Powys, which bordered the Wreocensæte to the west, may have still controlled the area at the time of the mentioned battle.[265] However, this area appears to have been ethnically diverse and the appearance of Britons in the same area years later complicates the picture.[266] Either way, the Britons' presence in *Caerlegion* might suggest the Wreocensætan kingdom was created after Æthelfrith's attack.

Determining the exact date of Wreocensæte's creation, or submission would stretch the existing sources. But Barbara Yorke has estimated that by c. 642 the kingdom was in existence and that Eowa, Penda's brother, was ruling the territory.[267] Eowa's death at *Maserfelth* which took place in the proposed Wreocensætan territory near the border with Powys lends support to Yorke's claims.[268] Further evidence also suggests an early date for Mercian *imperium* over the kingdom of the Wreocensæte. Kate Pretty argues that the governance of the Wreocensætan fell under Mercia's purview due to area churches being overseen by the see of Lichfield, which was associated with Mercia and lay within Mercian

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[262] While there are alternating views, I feel that this is the most valid placement of the kingdom. For more on this, see: Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 387, no. 39. For opposing arguments, see: Margaret Gelling, "The early history of western Mercia," in *Origins*, ed Bassett, 192; Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 18.
[263] *Annales Cambriae* 613 (ed. Morris, 46). For more on the dating of the battle, see: Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 388–9. Bede, *HE* ii.2 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 140–1).
[264] The men were British priests who had refused to change their dating of Easter according to the Roman tradition.
[265] Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 388–9.
[266] Bede, *HE* iii.9 and 10 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 242–45).
[267] Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 108. This necessarily complicates Brooks view that Eowa was the king of Mercia and was beholden to Oswald for his kingship: Nicholas Brooks, "The formation of the Mercian kingdom," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 159–70.
[268] This battle is attested in: Bede, *HE* iii.9 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 240–43); *HB*, ch. 65 (ed. Morris, 39); and, *Annales Cambriae* 644 (ed. Morris, 46). For more on Oswestry, see above.

core lands.[269] With the kingdom of the Wreocenscæte either being created by or falling under the Mercian *imperium*, it is likely that a Mercian royal family member ruled or governed over this smaller kingdom. The location of Wreocenscæte would have required that a Mercian family member maintain good relations with Welsh-Brittonic kingdoms such as Powys and Gwynedd, both of which were Mercian allies. This fact and the location of *Maserfelth* compels me to agree with Yorke that an important member of the Mercian royal family, Penda's brother, Eowa was likely charged with Wreocenscæte's administration as either a co-ruler with Penda or as subking. This locates one of Penda's direct relations in a subkingdom to the west of Mercia during the second quarter of the seventh century.

However, the kingdom of the Wreocenscæte was not the only westerly subkingdom. The Magonscætan are better documented in extant sources so approximating their location is fruitful. The Magonscæte have links to lands in modern Herefordshire and Shropshire. Despite these links, it remains difficult to definitively locate. Never explicitly listed within the Tribal Hidage, some scholars have linked the Magonscæte to the 'Westrna' found directly below the Wreocenscæte in the list.[270] However, there are arguments against this identification based on the recognised clockwise pattern of the Tribal Hidage.[271] Whether this association is correct or not, later charters and alliterative place-names locate part of the kingdom in the Lugg valley.[272] If we factor in Much Wenlock, which was purchased for Mildburh, a daughter of the Magonscætan royal family, the kingdom can be extended north by approximately thirty miles.[273]

Mildburh is one of the elite women featured in this thesis, so the kingdom of the Magonscæte and their connections to the Mercian royal family are important. The evidence for Mercian familial connections to the Magonscætan kingdom are more solid than Eowa's to the Wreocenscæte. Although the sources are late, they appear to be based on earlier traditions and can be found in several texts concerning St Mildrith, which have been entitled the *Mildrith Legend*. David Rollason, in his examination of the St Mildrith texts, dated the earliest recension to the eighth century.[274] Mildrith was still living in the first quarter of the eighth century indicating information beyond hagiographical *topoi* could be factual.[275]

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[269] Kate Pretty, "Defining the Magonscæte," 174.
[270] See: Finburg, *ECWM*, 217; Pretty, "Defining the Magonscæte," in *Origins*, 181.
[271] See: Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 18; Gelling, *West Midlands*, 83–4; Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 387, no. 39.
[272] S 1264 and 677. For more on the arguments for place-name evidence see: Finberg, "The Princes of the Magonscæte," 217–24; Pretty, "Defining the Magonscæte," 171–83. For arguments against this, see: Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 18–20.
[273] She will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four.
[274] For more on these texts and the edited addition of two, see: David Rollason, *The Mildrith Legend: A Study in Early Medieval Hagiography in England* (London: Leicester UP, 1982).
[275] Mildrith is present in several charters for Minster-in-Thanet, all of which are discussed at length in chapter four.

The genealogy of St. Mildrith, found in the *Mildrith Legend*, is key to the discussion in this section and the thesis in general. It details that Domne Eafe, a royal daughter of Kent, had married Merewalh, a son of Penda.[276] Merewalh's specific connection to the Magonscætan kingdom is dependent on later ascertains found in Goscelin of Saint-Bertin's *Vita Mildburgae*, one of the *Mildrith Legend*'s texts.[277] The claims of the twelfth-century Goscelin are supported by charter evidence which bequeaths land to Mildburh in the territory associated with the Magonscæte kingdom.[278] Domne Eafe would bear four of Merewalh's children, named: Mildburh, Mildrith, Mildgith, and Merefin. All three daughters, Mildburg, Mildrith, and Mildgith, would join the monastic life at an early age. Merefin died in childhood. However, these four children were not Merewalh's only offspring. The text labelled *St Mildburg's Testament* has Mildburh's two half-brothers, Merchelm and Mildfrith, granting lands to their sister in a charter preserved within the text.[279] King Æthelred confirmed this charter (S 1799) marked as Mildburh's uncle, and further charters were granted during the reigns of Ceolred, Cenred and Æthelbald in the eighth century.[280] Merewalh's daughters and the implications of these charters will be discussed further in chapter four. The reconstructed family of Domne Eafe and Merewalh can be viewed in figure 2.3.

The Hwicce

So far, I have established that two rulers of Mercian subkingdoms can be directly linked to the Mercian royal family. For the next kingdom, it is not so easy to make these familial connections. To the south of the Magonscæte, we find the Hwicce. Compared to the previous two political units, evidence abounds for this kingdom and its territory is generally

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[276] There have been questions of Merewalh's origin based on his name, which means 'illustrious Welshman'. Pretty, re-evaluating Finberg's findings, concludes contra Finberg that Merewalh was likely of British, and not Mercian, origin. I would like to point out, however, that Pretty's argument discounts other evidence. Penwalh, Guthlac's father, was from the same royal Mercian line as Penda and shared the same second naming part '-walh', and Mildburh's connection to Æthelred is explicit. Therefore, Merewalh's familial connection to the Mercian family as a son of Penda in my view is secure. See: *VSG*, ch. 1 (ed. Colgrave, 72–3); Finberg, *ECWM*, 217–19; Pretty, "Defining the Magonscæte," 176–77. Others support Merewalh's familial connection to Penda: Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 47–9; Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 107; Gelling, *West Midlands*, 181–2.
[277] This seems to be an assertion of Finberg, claiming the text was written by Goscelin. Generally, scholars have followed his lead: "The Princes of the Magonscæte," *ECWM*, 217–18. However, the Life of St. Mildburh has not received any attention beyond this and remains in a non-digitized manuscript in the British Library (London, BL, Add. MS, 34633). More work must be done on this but is beyond the purview of this thesis. For more on the later cult of St. Mildburh at Much Wenlock, see: Simon Yarrow, "The Invention of St Mildburg of Wenlock: Community and Cult in an Anglo-Norman Shropshire Town," *Midland History* 38, no. 1 (2013): 1–15.
[278] Charters S 1798, 1799 and 1800.
[279] This text preserves lost charters and they have been given Sawyer numbers: S 1798, 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802. The *Testament* has been edited and translated by: H.P.R Finberg, "St. Mildburg's Testament," in *ECWM*, 197–216.
[280] S 1800, 1801, 1802.

associated with the area of the see of Worcester.[281] It is unknown when the Hwiccan kingdom fell under Mercian *imperium*. Furthermore, it is also difficult to establish the level of control the Mercian royal family had over the Hwicce. The Magonsæte and Wreocensæte both seem to have been incorporated at some point just before or during Penda's reign. As I explained above, Merewalh ruled the Magonsæte and Penda's brother, Eowa, may have controlled the Wreocensæte. While there is early mention of Mercian presence in Hwiccan territory, it is unclear if this indicates Mercian *imperium*. The Hwicce may have been incorporated into the Mercian hegemony, or created, sometime during Penda's reign. However, direct evidence for Hwiccan submission to Mercia does not appear until much later during Wulfhere's reign. Additionally, it is unclear whether the Hwiccan royal family shared a familial relationship with Mercia's elite family. In this section, I will explain the possible familial links after I discuss evidence for Mercian *imperium* over the Hwicce.

I begin with Penda's possible, and perhaps earliest, expansion into the southern kingdoms via the Hwicce, which can be witnessed in the *ASC*. The entry for 628, marks that Cynegils and his son Cwichelm, joint rulers of Wessex (at this time known as the Gewisse),[282] fought at Cirencester and came to terms.[283] What these terms were is anyone's guess. They may have included the surrender of Hwiccan lands to Penda, in addition to a marriage between Cynegils' son Cenwalh (r. 642–672) and Penda's unnamed sister.[284] Wessex may have also been placed temporarily under Mercian *imperium*, but this was never stable with the Mercian royal family losing and regaining Wessex lands over the seventh century. If Wessex was under Mercian *imperium*, it was certainly terminated when Cenwalh regained the West Saxon throne, having lost it for a period of three years after repudiating Penda's sister.[285] The location of Cirencester within what is recognised as Hwiccan territory has led to speculation that Penda created the Hwiccan polity from Brittonic political units.[286] Although Penda could have subsumed these lands into an already existing territory. Sources are vague, nor do they clarify whether Penda held the Hwiccan territory as a subkingdom.[287] At this point, he may have been a tributary king himself under Edwin, as I explore below. If this was the case, the conflict at Cirencester may have been at Edwin's behest and not of Penda's

[281] For example, see: Hooke, *Anglo-Saxon landscape*, 12–20; Steven Bassett, "In search of the origins of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 6–17.
[282] For more on their joint rulership, see: Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 143–4.
[283] *ASC* A 628 (ed. Bately, 28).
[284] Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 27.
[285] Bede. *HE* iii.7 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 233–35); *ASC* A 645 (ed. Bately, 29) and 658 (ed. Bately, 30).
[286] Cirencester may have been captured after the West Saxon kings, Cuthwine and Ceawlin, fought and killed three Brittonic kings. However, Sims-Williams has raised doubts. See: *ASC* A 577 (ed. Bately, 24); Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 23–4. For those that accept this view, see: Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 45; Hooke, *Kingdom of Hwicce*, 5–9; Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 109.
[287] See: Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 27; Tyler, "Early Mercian Hegemony," 5.

design.[288] Thus, Hwiccan status in relation to Mercia at this early date cannot be definitively determined.

Slightly more conclusive evidence for Mercian *imperium* over the Hwicce appears later during Wulfhere and Æthelred's reigns in literary and charter evidence. Bede remarks that Wulfhere had given the Isle of Wight and the province of Meonware as a baptismal gift to Æthelwealh, king of the South Saxons.[289] Wulfhere had gained these two pieces of land in 661 as part of another Mercian push into West Saxon territory.[290] It is not known at what date Æthelwealh's baptism occurred, but Bede informs us that Æthelwealh's wife and queen, Eafe, was a daughter of Eanfrith, the ruler of the Hwicce. Bede also states that Eanfrith's brother was Eanhere, raising the possibility they were co-rulers. Æthelwealh's marriage to Eafe has been used to indicate Mercian *imperium* over the Hwicce due to seeming Mercian approval of the match.[291] As I will show in chapter three, viewing marriages as purely forms of alliance building limits our understanding of early medieval marriages. It is just as likely to have been a match between two equally sized political units not negotiated by the Mercian royal family. Whether Mercian elites had a hand in contracting this marriage is unknown, and it likely may have taken place earlier than Æthelwealh's baptism. Either way, Æthelwealh's marriage to Eafe cannot prove Mercian control over the Hwicce.

Better evidence for *Mercian imperium* over the Hwicce is witnessed in some of the earliest charters we have for the pre-Conquest period. The charters in question are all grants to monastic centres for the purpose of founding or enriching the Church's holdings in which Hwiccan kings appear as grantors to their favoured establishments or religious individuals. It is telling that Hwiccan rulers sought confirmation and approval for these grants from Mercian kings. These charters have been examined at length by Finberg and Sims-Williams, and both agree that by Wulfhere and Æthelred's reigns the Hwiccan kingdom was a Mercian subkingdom.[292] While it is possible that this took place earlier in Penda's reign, Mercian *imperium* was not stable until his sons' reigns.

A brief discussion of the charters showing Mercian influence over the Hwiccan kingdom is important for understanding the potential links between Queen Osthryth of Mercia (d. 697)

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[288] H.M. Chadwick, *The Origin of the English Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1907), 6.
[289] Bede, *HE* iv.13 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 373). For more on the political significance of sponsorship, see: Joseph H. Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship: Ritual Sponsorship in Anglo-Saxon England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1998), 205–228.
[290] *ASC* A 661 (ed. Bately, 30).
[291] See: Martin Welch, "The kingdom of the South Saxons: the origins," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 79; Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 109; Finberg attributes Mercian approval to Wulfhere's recent baptismal sponsorship: Finberg, "Princes of the Hwicce," *ECWM*, 171.
[292] Many others have discussed the Hwiccan charters as well, but this is a sampling. Sims-Williams, particularly, extends discussion into the eighth century. See: Finberg, *ECWM*, 172–180; Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 33–39.

and the ruling family of the Hwicce. There are ten charters of varying levels of authenticity that directly highlight the Hwiccan relationship with Mercia.[293] Out of these ten, two charters dated c. 706 — S 54 and 1174 — are considered forgeries, although some authentic material may have been used during their construction.[294] Charter S 54 is a grant made by Æthelweard, who is styled as a *subregulus*, for land to Evesham's Bishop Ecgwine. In S 1174, a man named Æthelric is the grantor of eight hides to St. Mary's at Horn. Both charters link Æthelweard and Æthelric as sons of the Hwiccan king Oshere and both are made with the consent of King Cenred, Æthelred's successor. Despite being forgeries, Æthelweard and Æthelric's relationship to Oshere aligns with earlier authentic grants.

Charter S 53 (B 85), dated c. 692, confirms Æthelweard and Æthelric among Oshere's sons. In this grant, Oshere, styled as *rex Huiccorum*, alongside his son Æthelheard gives fifteen hides to Abbess Cuthswith.[295] The extant witness list shows Oshere's three sons Æthelweard, Æthelric and Æthelheard, in addition to a fourth son, Æthelberht. Furthermore, a possible relative of Oshere named Osuuido (or, Oswudu) also appears in the witness list.[296] What is interesting about S 53 is the appearance of Æthelred, directly under Oshere and his four sons. This may or may not be King Æthelred of Mercia. However, that he appears with Oshere and his sons before Archbishop Berhtwald indicates this is indeed King Æthelred.[297] Another charter S 1177 (B 122), dated to King Cenred of Mercia's reign (704 x 709), details an authentic grant made by Æthelweard and Æthelheard to the same Cuthswith of S 53. The extant witness list places Cenred first indicating his superior status. Outside S 54 and 1174 — the two spurious charters discussed above which style Æthelweard as *subregulus* — the only reference to Mercian *imperium* over the Hwicce are witness list appearances and the placement within these lists of Mercian kings.

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[293] Charters listed in order of estimated ascending date: S 53, 51, 70, 52, 1165, 1177, 1174, 54, 1429, and 1255.

[294] Both charters are from the Evesham Abbey archive. For discussion of S 54, see: Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 36, no. 101; Catherine Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils c.650–c.850* (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1995), 262. For discussion of S 1174, see: Finberg, *ECWM*, no. 202, 88; Anton Scharer, *Die angelsächsiche Königsurkunde im 7. Und 8. Jahrhundert* (Wien: Hermann Böhlaus Nachf, 1982), 247 (takes as spurious because of ninth-century bounds addition). For a small selection of scholarship on forgeries, see: Pierre Chaplais, "The Authenticity of the Royal Anglo-Saxon Diplomas of Exeter," *Historical Research* 39, no. 99 (1966): 1–34 and "Some early diplomas"; Christopher Brooke, "Approaches to medieval forgery," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 3, no. 8 (1968): 377–86.

[295] For a discussion of Cuthswith and the two charters she appears in, see: Patrick Sims-Williams, "Cuthswith, seventh-century abbess of Inkberrow, near Worcester, and the Würzburg manuscript of Jerome on Ecclesiastes," *ASE 5* (1976): 1–21.

[296] For Osuuido, see: Finberg, *ECWM*, 169–170.

[297] Archbishop Berhtwald was the successor of Theodore. For more on Berhtwald, see: Nicholas Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury* (London: Leicester UP, 1984), 76–80.

This changes in other grants. The above charters S 53 and 1177 are two of five documents which originate from the Worcester archive.[298] Because Worcester's diocesan boundaries are typically considered to be coterminous with Hwiccan territory, this explains the concentration of Hwiccan charters in this archive.[299] Oshere appears once more making a grant with King Æthelred of thirty hides to a monk named Frithowald in S 52, which is dated c. 680, but with a more probable date of either 678 or 693.[300] While this charter is heavily interpolated, Oshere is titled *rex* with Æthelred styled as *regis Brittanniæ*.[301] Æthelred's styling and confirmation as 'king of Britain' shows his elevated status when compared to Oshere's *rex*, which implies his subordinate status. This status becomes explicit in two eighth-century charters, S 1429 and 1255, where Oshere is marked as a Mercian *subregulus*.[302] Recording a c. 736 x 737 synod presided over by Archbishop Nothhelm, S 1429 states in the proem that Oshere was *subregulus* to King Æthelred. The synod, concerned with a problematic succession in a private monastery, referenced an original grant by Oshere to Dunne and her daughter. These same lands appear later in S 1255 being granted by Bishop Mildred to Abbess Æthelburh in 774.[303] Unfortunately, there is no date given in either charter as to when the original grant took place. However, both reference earlier grants and clearly state that Oshere was a subking of the Hwicce under Mercian *imperium* during Æthelred's reign.

Oshere was not the earliest ruler of the Hwicce for which we have evidence for being a Mercian subking. A charter from Bath (S 51) and one from Gloucester (S 70), with estimated dates of c. 675 and c. 679 respectively, are much earlier than Oshere's charters.[304] Both show either Oshere's predecessors or co-rulers, Osric and Oswald. Osric receives mention as being a ruler of the Hwicce in the *HE* and as a Mercian subking in another charter S 1165, which I

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[298] Worcester has not yet been edited by the Anglo-Saxon Charters project jointly produced by The British Academy and Royal Historical Society to date. Therefore, I have accessed the Worcester archive through Birch's earlier collection. For more on the history of Worcester's archive, see: N.R. Ker, "Hemming's Cartulary: A Description of the Two Worcester Cartularies in Cotton Tiberius A.xiii," in *Studies in Medieval History Presented to Frederick Maurice Powicke*, ed. R. Hunt, W. Pantin and R. Southern (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1948), 49–75; Francesca Tinti, "From Episcopal Conception to Monastic Compilation: Hemming's Cartulary in Context," *EME* 11 (2003): 233–61.

[299] If such a small sample size can have concentrations. For discussion of Hwiccan territory, see: Hooke, *Kingdom of the Hwicce*, 5–7 and 12–20.

[300] S 52, B51. For critical analysis on this charter, see: Finberg, *ECWM*, no. 196, 86; Patrick Wormald, "Bede and the Conversion of England: The Charter Evidence," Jarrow Lecture 1984 (1985): 25; Patrick Sims-Williams, "St Wilfrid and two charters dated AD 676 and 680," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 39, no. 2 (1988): 174–83.

[301] For more on the charter use of *rex Britanniae* as an expression of authority, see: Capper Morn, "Titles and Troubles: Conceptions of Mercian Royal Authority in Eighth- and Ninth-Century Charters," in *Problems and Possibilities*, ed. Jarrett and McKinley, 212–14.

[302] This charter has a translation and short explanation in: Whitelock, ed., *EHD*, no. 68, 494–95. For more on the synod, see: Cubitt, *Church Councils*, 41, 80 and 265.

[303] Translation in: Whitelock, ed., *EHD*, no. 75, 503–4.

[304] For S 51, see: Susan Kelly, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Charters 13. Charters of Bath and Wells* (Oxford: British Academy, 2007), 53–62.

discuss later.[305] Bath's foundational charter S 51, while it has a genuine basis, has suffered from later interpolation.[306] Despite later additions and changes, the charter shows King Osric granting land at Bath to a suspected Frankish abbess named Berta.[307] Bath, usually associated as residing in West Saxon territory, had originally been part of the see of Worcester, indicating how far south-east Hwiccan territory had previously extended.[308] King Æthelred confirms charter S 51 in the witness list in the second position. Much like S 52 and 53, the only hints of Mercian *imperium* are Æthelred's presence in and confirmation of the charter.

The Gloucester charter S 70 confirms that which the Bath charter does not: Mercian overlordship over Hwiccan rulers. Finberg and Scharer have both recognised that S 70 is a later fabrication of the ninth century, but that it has likely been modelled from an original.[309] Much like the above-mentioned spurious charters S 54 and 1174, some authentic elements are present. This charter includes Æthelred granting land at Gloucester for the foundation of a minster to *ministris meis nobilis generis in provincia Huicciorum*. These ministers are Osric and his brother Oswald. The use of *ministri* here is likely an indicator of the late date of this charter's composition. However, if Thacker is correct in thinking that *ministri* announces a king's royal servant who performs a specific duty, the fabricator may be glossing the original Latin for a recognisable term.[310] If this is the case, the original Latin was likely something signifying Osric and Oswald's relationship to Æthelred as subkings for the Mercian hegemony.

A few observations can be made after exploring the literary and charter evidence for the Hwicce. It is possible that Penda had extended Mercian influence into Hwiccan territory as early as 628 after the battle at Cirencester, as well as for Mercian *imperium* to have continued into Wulfhere and Æthelred's reign. However, Hwiccan status in relation to the Mercian royal family's expansionary efforts cannot be securely confirmed for this early date. What can be stated with certainty, using the above charters, is that Mercian *imperium* over the Hwiccan kingdom can be dated to at least 675, the beginning of Æthelred's reign. With Æthelred consenting to Hwiccan charters in his succession year, we could assume that Osric and his brother Oswald were already subkings to Wulfhere, thus pushing this dating slightly earlier. Charter S 1165 confirms this subordinate status to sometime between 672 and 674,

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[305] Bede mentions that he was ruler of the Hwicce when Bishop Oftfor returned to Britain and began preaching in Osric's kingdom. Bede, *HE* iv.23 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 409–11). For more on Oftfor, see: Allan Scott McKinley, "Understanding the Earliest Bishops of Worcester c.660–860," in *Leaders of the Anglo-Saxon Church: From Bede to Stigand*, ed. Alexander Rumble (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2012), 77–96.
[306] For more, see: Finberg, *ECWM*, 173–74; Heather Edwards, *The Charters of the Early West Saxon Kingdom*, BAR 198 (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 1988), 218–23; Patrick Sims-Williams, "St Wilfrid and two charters dated AD 676 and 680," *JEH* 39, no. 2 (1988): 171.
[307] Frankish origin is based on onomastics. For her Frankish origins, see: Sims-Williams, "St Wilfrid," 165–67; Kelly, ed., Charters of Bath and Wells, 3–4.
[308] Edwards, *West Saxon Kingdom*, 220 and 223.
[309] Finberg, *ECWM*, no. 1, 158–66; Scharer, *Königsurkunde*, 146–48.
[310] Thacker, "Some Terms for Noblemen," 202–3.

dating *Mercian imperium* over the Hwicce to this time. As a whole, all the discussed charters demonstrate part of Mercia's southernmost area of hegemony and the ability for Mercian elites to hold lands in Hwiccan territory.

But what does Mercian influence in the Hwiccan kingdom tell us about the familial connections between the Hwiccan and Mercian royal families? Based on Thomas of Marlborough's thirteenth-century *History of the Abbey of Evesham*, it is possible that Hwiccan rulers may have been related through affinal connections. Thomas of Marlborough elaborates that *subregulus* Æthelheard of the Hwicce claimed a familial connection to Queen Osthryth of Mercia and Offa of Essex.[311] These claims of kinship were made during a dispute between Evesham Abbey and subking Æthelheard concerning the estates at Fladbury. Æthelheard claimed that Æthelred had wrongly granted the estates because they had been part of Osthryth's inheritance and should have remained in the possession of her kin. Further, he stated that Ceolred, Æthelred's son, was not Osthryth's biological child, and because Æthelred had abdicated the Mercian throne to become a monk, he was the next heir to the estates at Fladbury. Bishop Ecgwine, taking Æthelheard's claims seriously — or more likely attempting to avoid conflict with Æthelheard's army — returned Fladbury to him. The late date of Thomas of Marlborough's composition and the nature of the dispute might lead to conclusions that the account is fictitious.

An extant charter S 76 in which Queen Osthryth appears leads me to the tentative conclusion that Thomas of Marlborough's account may have basis in fact. Considered an authentic charter, it details a grant made by Æthelred for lands at Fladbury to Bishop Oftfor for the purpose of re-establishing a monastic centre.[312] With an estimated dating of 697 x 699, Osthryth appears in the proem alongside her husband Æthelred. Not only is this the first instance of a Mercian queen found in a charter, but the grant was made soon after Osthryth's murder in 697.[313] Because Æthelred made the grant posthumously, this could indicate the donated lands had been part of her holdings; and thus, why she is listed.[314] This might lend weight to Æthelheard's claim that Æthelred wrongly bestowed Osthryth's lands. Alternatively, she may have granted the estate at Fladbury as part of her will and Æthelheard was trying to lay claim to a desired property through tenuous means. There also remains the possibility that the copyist was aware of the feud between Evesham Abbey and Æthelheard and decided to embellish the original charter by adding invented detail. This seems unlikely,

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311 H.P.R. Finberg, "Princes of the Hwicce," in *ECWM*, 167–80; Thomas of Marlborough, *History of the Abbey of Evesham*, OMT, ed. Leslie Watkiss and Jane Sayers (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), iii.1.119.
312 S 76 is considered an authentic or broadly trustworthy charter by most. See: Scharer, *Königsurkunde*, 152–4; Wormald, "Bede and the Conversion," 25; Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 140–1.
313 Bede, *HE* v.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 565).
314 These lands may have been given as part of the marriage contract. See chapter three.

however, because Worcester, the archive of S 76, and Evesham were opposing institutions and therefore presumably had little contact or exchange. Further investigation must be made but is beyond the scope of this thesis.

My pause to dismiss Æthelheard's claim is also prompted by Finberg's theory concerning the origins of the Hwiccan royal family. Finberg, considering the *History of Evesham Abbey*, notes unique alliterative naming patterns between the Hwiccan and Northumbrian royal families. He proposes that part of the Bernician royal family, mainly Oslaf and Oswudu, may have allied with Penda during the 628 conflict between Mercia and Wessex at Cirencester. He suggests that after Penda won control of Hwiccan lands, these were given to his Northumbrian allies Oslaf and Oswudu.[315] There have, not surprisingly, been objections to Finberg's claim.[316] There are several issues at play here which have bearing on this discussion. First, Finberg did not consider that at this time King Edwin of Northumbria may have had *imperium* over Mercia, as I briefly mentioned above. Oslaf and Oswudu were members of a rival Northumbrian family and Edwin would have sought their eradication. Second, unique naming patterns are not exclusive to certain families. While similar naming elements and alliterative letters can assist in linking family members within a generation or two, it should not be the sole evidence of kinship for more attenuated connections. Lastly, Finberg also avoided considering Æthelheard's other claim of kinship with King Offa of Essex, who may have been connected to the Mercian royal family but certainly not Northumbrian. I will discuss this further in chapter three.

When it comes to Hwiccan familial connections to the Mercian royal family, the best policy is to remain open to possibilities. I am generally suspicious of Æthelheard's claims recorded by Thomas of Marlborough because they were made during a land dispute. The exchange of lands between Æthelheard and Bishop Ecgwine that supposedly ended this dispute are only recorded in a charter that is considered to be spurious.[317] However, that a generally authentic charter located in a separate archive details Fladbury lands in connection with Queen Osthryth makes it impossible to completely dismiss Thomas of Marlborough's story. Æthelheard's claims of kinship while suspicious, are not completely untenable. A marriage to a Mercian or Hwiccan daughter between the two families would not have been beyond the

[315] Finburg, *ECWM*, 167–70.
[316] For example: Steven Bassett, "In search of the origins of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 6; Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 33.
[317] Charter S 83 is unanimously considered a spurious charter. This is unsurprising because the Evesham archive is notorious for forgeries. This charter is supposedly a 716 grant by Æthelbald to Evesham Abbey for twenty-five hides at various estates. See: Peter Sawyer, "Kings and Merchants," in *Early Medieval Kingship*, ed. Sawyer and Wood, 148 n. 44; Scharer, *Königsurkunde*, 161; James Campbell, "The Sale of Land and the Economics of Power in Early England: Problems and Possibilities," *Haskins Society Journal* 1 (1989): 24.

realms of possibility. With this in mind, there could very well be some merit to Finberg's theory, even if it disregards multiple factors.

The Pecsæte, Elmet, and Lindsey

With the western-most subkingdoms of Mercia and their familial links to the Mercian royal family explored, I now move to the kingdoms north of Mercia. One of the kingdoms in this area is of particular interest to this thesis because of its associations with Queen Osthryth and her husband King Æthelred. However, little is known of the kingdoms of the Pecsæte, Elmet, or Lindsey which lay between Northumbria and Mercia. The Pecsætan kingdom's territory is thought to have been centred in the Peak district in the southern Pennines and the only mention of this kingdom resides in the Tribal Hidage. Located slightly northeast near Leeds lay Elmet. This kingdom has evidence of being inhabited by Britons and remaining a self-governed polity until the end of the first quarter of the seventh century.[318] Sometime after Edwin regained Northumbria in 616, he forcefully annexed Elmet and expelled Elmet's king, Ceretic.[319] What happened to Elmet after Edwin was slain by Penda is anyone's guess. But the territory Elmet had previously occupied had likely been subsumed into the kingdom of Deira. This area which had previously been the territory of Elmet was frequently the site of battles between Mercia and Northumbria throughout the seventh century.[320]

To the southeast of Elmet lay the kingdom of Lindsey.[321] The *Royal Genealogies* list the potential kings of Lindsey, but determining timeframes for their reigns has been problematic, particularly the last listed king Aldfrith.[322] There are no signs that point to Lindsey's royal family having kinship connections with either Mercia or Northumbria's ruling families. Furthermore, it is unknown if the ruling family of Lindsey were ever considered as independent rulers because all extant textual evidence dates to after its annexation by either Northumbria

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[318] Nicholas Higham, "Northumbria's southern frontier: a review," *EME* 14, no. 4 (2006): 417.
[319] This may be the same Ceretic (Ceredig) that the *AnnCam* mark as dying in 616. It could be that Edwin's campaign against Elmet was his first after regaining the throne. See: *HB*, ch. 63 (ed. Morris, 38); *AnnCam* 616 (ed. Morris, 46).
[320] The site *Hæthfelth*, identified with Hatfield, South Yorkshire, lies in the borderlands shared with Elmet, Lindsey and Mercia: Bede, *HE* ii.20 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 203). The battle at *Winwæd* located near Leeds where Penda was slain can also be placed within the historical bounds of Elmet: Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 291–93).
[321] For more on Lindsey, see: Bruce Eagles, "Lindsey," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 202–12; Steven Bassett, "Lincoln and the Anglo-Saxon see of Lindsey," *ASE* 18 (1989): 1–32; Alan Vince, ed., *Pre-Viking Lindsey* (Lincoln: City of Lincoln Archaeological Unit, 1993); Thomas Green, "A Re-Evaluation of the Evidence of Anglian-British Interaction in the Lincoln Region," (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2011).
[322] Stenton argued that Aldfrith could be identified with a king witnessing a charter of Offa in the late eighth century. However, it seems increasingly likely that Aldfrith can be placed in the late seventh century. See: Frank Stenton, "Lindsey and its Kings," in *Preparatory*, ed. Stenton, 127–35; Dumville, "Anglian collection"; Green, "Lincoln Region," 87–89.

or Mercia. *The* royal family of Northumbria appears to have been the first to claim *imperium* over this territory. However, Lindsey would eventually fall and remain under Mercian *imperium* after 679, and it appears the Mercian royal family took particular interest in establishing other ties to this kingdom.[323] Æthelred and Osthryth's favoured monastery of Bardney was located in Lindsey, where Æthelred chose to retire after abdicating the throne.[324] Bardney was later the site of saints' cults for both rulers, which may, or may not have been an intentional policy to further unite Lindsey with Mercia.[325] All these various considerations point to northern 'buffer' kingdoms, as envisioned by Yorke. There is little evidence which suggests Mercian *imperium* for the Pecsæte and the kingdom of Elmet, but these areas were frequently sites of battle, which includes the kingdom of Lindsey, a frequent cause of tension between Mercia and Northumbria. Either way, familial connection to the Mercian royal family cannot be determined for all three kingdoms of the Pecsæte, Elmet, and Lindsey.

The Middle Angles

I now turn south to the kingdom of the Middle Angles which has clear connections to the Mercian royal family first through Peada and then through an administrative agent who was possibly married to one of Penda's daughters. The term 'Middle Angles' appears in two early sources: the *HE* and the *VSG*. Bede affirms that Penda had placed his son Peada as *princeps* over the *Middilengli* or *Mediterranei Angli* because Peada had shown his worthiness to hold the office of king.[326] Though Bede labels Peada as *princeps*, he explicitly states that Peada is king of a *regnum*.[327]

Questions arise, however, concerning the viability of regarding the Middle Angles as a distinct kingdom because it is unclear whether the individual political units, from which this kingdom was constructed, considered themselves part of a distinct and unified *gentes*. Marking Middle Anglia's absence from the Tribal Hidage, Wendy Davies concludes that the term

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[323] It seems Edwin also claimed *imperium* over the kingdom of Lindsey, but this may have changed upon his death. Penda may have laid claim to the kingdom because it was regained by his son Wulfhere during his reign. It was only lost to Northumbria for a short period of time and then Æthelred, Wulfhere's successor, won the territory back likely after the battle at Trent. See: Bede, *HE* ii.16 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 191–93); Bede, *HE* iv.3 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 337); Bede, *HE* iv.3 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 347); Bede, *HE* iv.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 371); Bede, *HE* iv.21 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 401).
[324] Bede, *HE* iii.11 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 247); Bede, *HE* v.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 567).
[325] Their cult is found in *Đe Secgan*. See: David Rollason, "Lists of saints' resting-places in Anglo-Saxon England," *ASE 7* (1978): 61–93. For Mercian policy, see: Alan Thacker, "Kings, Saints, and Monasteries in Pre-Viking Mercia," *Midland History* 10, no. 1 (1985): 2–4; Barbara Yorke, "Lindsey: The Lost Kingdom Found?," in *Pre-Viking Lindsey*, ed. Vince, 144–45.
[326] Bede, *HE* iii.21 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 278–79).
[327] The terminology for kings, subkings, and other leading positions is discussed briefly by: Dumville, "Terminology of Overkingship," 347–8.

'Middle Angles' was just a descriptive term for the Anglian peoples in central England. She further argues that the Angles found in this large region were just an amalgamation of different groups residing within the same territory. Thus, it cannot be considered a Middle Anglian kingdom as such, rather it is more indicative of nascent administrative units.[328] While this could certainly be the case, it is just as likely that Penda created a kingdom out of the smaller territorial units recently subsumed under Mercian *imperium*, and placed Peada as his subking over this newly created kingdom of the Middle Angles.[329] If I am correct, Penda had done the same for his other son Merewalh, the king of the Magonsæte kingdom in the west. Alternatively, if the kingdom of the Middle Angles had already existed, Penda charged Peada with its administration after claiming *imperium* over the smaller political units.[330] Either of these are viable options for the appearance and governance of the Middle Angles as a subkingdom of Mercia.

I extend these arguments by suggesting that the Middle Anglian position of subking was short-lived, with only Peada having claimed the title. After Peada's death in 656, the Middle Angles were controlled by multiple Mercian subkings and officials, much like Davies envisioned. My thought is based on the size of the territories, their placement, and later evidence from Wulfhere and Æthelred's reigns.

The location of the Middle Anglian kingdom has been examined by David Dumville. He provisionally found that the kingdom occupied a very substantial territory bounded by the kingdoms of Wessex, Essex, East Anglia, Lindsey, the Mercian core lands, and the Hwicce.[331] This is the same territory associated with the see of Leicester created in 737.[332] I second this particular placement based on Bede's statement that Peada was allowed to retain control of Southern Mercia, which was effectively the area where Dumville placed the Middle Angles.[333] Within this vast territory were all the smaller political units described by the Tribal Hidage which lie south of Lindsey through the Fens and into the territories of the Chilternscætan and Fœrpingas.

Governance of the Middle Angles appears to have been splintered after Peada's reign, which lasted from 653 to 656. After *Winwœd* and the death of his father Penda, Oswiu allowed Peada to retain control of the South Mercians, which included Middle Anglia. This was

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328 Wendy Davies, "Middle Anglia and the Middle Angles," *Midland History* 2, no. 1 (1973): 20.
329 David Dumville, "Essex, Middle Anglia," in *Origins* and "The terminology of overkingship in early Anglo-Saxon England," in *The Anglo-Saxons*, ed. Hines, 358.
330 Damian Tyler, "An Early Mercian Hegemony: Penda and Overkingship in the Seventh Century," *Midland History* 30 (2005): 4.
331 David Dumville, "Essex, Middle Anglia, and the expansion of Mercia in the South-East Midlands," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 134.
332 Ibid., 130 and 134.
333 Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 295).

supposedly allowed because Peada had married Oswiu's daughter, Alhflæd. The next spring (656) Peada was reportedly murdered by this same daughter.[334] I analyse this incident in chapter three of this thesis. Until 658, Oswiu ruled as overking, but his level of control is questionable because three Mercian *duces*, Immin, Eafa, and Eadberht, were able to rebel and they restored Wulfhere to the Mercian throne.[335] That three nobles could restore a member of the Mercian royal family — who had presumably been in hiding — to the throne indicates that Oswiu may have had trouble controlling the vast Mercian territories without Peada.

During Wulfhere's reign, there is no evidence for a singular subking or official being placed over the Middle Anglian territories. We do have evidence that St Guthlac's father resided in Middle Anglia around this time. The *VSG* states that Guthlac's father Penwalh (or Penwald in the OE *VSG*) originated from the Mercian royal line traced back to Icel.[336] His name certainly suggests this connection with a first naming element 'Pen-', the same as Penda. With Penwalh's royal status and residence somewhere in Middle Anglia this could suggest he was in the territory acting as a Mercian official. This would not be the only instance of an obscure Mercian relative acting in an official capacity in a subkingdom.

Examples of Mercian officials sharing royal kinship are in two trustworthy charters, S 71 and 1169, found in the archive at Malmesbury.[337] Both charters grant land to Aldhelm to enrich Malmesbury's holdings. Charter S 71, the earlier of the two documents dated to 681, has Æthelred granting land at Tetbury, Gloucester at the request of his *patricius* and *propinquus* Cenfrith, who later appears in the witness list of the same charter as *comes*. Tetbury is located approximately five miles north-west of Malmesbury. That Cenfrith, a relative and subking/official of Æthelred, is granting land together with Æthelred this close to Malmesbury indicates it was likely in their possession.[338] The other charter that shows Mercian kinship connections, S 1169, dated to 685, is a grant for land at Somerford Keynes made by Berhtwald who is styled as *rex*. But much like King Oshere of the Hwicce and other Hwiccan rulers, Berhtwald has the grant confirmed by King Æthelred. Somerford Keynes lies approximately ten miles north-east of Malmesbury. Yorke identifies Berhtwald as the

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[334] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 294–5).
[335] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 294–5).
[336] *VSG*, ch. 1 and 2 (ed. Colgrave, 73–75) and *AOELS*, 146–47. For more on Guthlac and the implications of his Mercian connections, see: Paul Cavill, "The Naming of Guthlac," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 59 (2015): 25–47.
[337] Scharer is a bit sceptical of both charters and finds that S 71 was used in the fabrication of another charter S 73. However, Wormald and Edwards accept these charters basically authentic. See: Scharer, *Königsurkunde*, 93 no. 47 and 148–50; Wormald, "Conversion of England," 25; Edwards, *West Saxon Kingdom*, 90–4.
[338] For more on *patricius* and *comes*, see: Alan Thacker, "Some Terms for Noblemen in Anglo-Saxon England, c.650–900," in *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 2, ed. David Brown, James Campbell and Sonia Hawkes (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 1981), 207–9 and 213–21.

individual described in *the VW* as the *filius fratris* and *praefectus* of Æthelred.[339] This could very well be the same Berhtwald because the dating of both the charters and the timeframe given in the *VW* align. In both, Berhtwald is an official of some kind to Æthelred. If this is the case, we potentially have two members of the Mercian royal family granting lands in the Hwiccan kingdom near West Saxon territory. With this it is possible Penwalh was also a Mercian official in the territories of the Middle Angles.

Other confirmed Mercian subkings operating in the kingdoms of the Middle Angles have ties to multiple subkingdoms in this region, and one, Frithuwald, could have married into the Mercian royal family. I will discuss their marriage later in chapter three, but it is important for this discussion to connect these subkings to Mercia. Charter S 1165 is possibly one of the earliest authentic grants, despite surviving in copied form, that can illuminate these familial networks.[340] Made by Frithuwald, this charter grants lands at Chertsey and Thorpe, alongside lands by the port of London, to Bishop Eorcenwald and St. Peter's minster at Chertsey.[341] This document is dated to sometime between 672 and 674 which was just before Eorcenwald was ordained bishop in London for the East Saxons.[342] This is the same Eorcenwald that, according to Bede, had established both the monastery at Chertsey and a corresponding monastery at Barking for his sister, Æthelburh.[343] In S 1165, Frithuwald is marked as "of the province of the men of Surrey, subking of Wulfhere," which has been interpreted as meaning he was the subking of Surrey.[344] However, Frithuwald may have been charged with a territory larger than just Surrey.

Building off of Patrick Wormald's work, John Blair convincingly proposes that Frithuwald, originally from a local Surrey family, was not the subking of Surrey alone but rather a larger patchwork of Middle Anglian estates.[345] He bases this on dependencies of Peterborough Abby located in areas linked to Frithuwald's territory, granted by a man named Frithuric.[346] Shared naming elements and an attestation directly under Frithuwald, may indicate that Frithuric was related to Frithuwald. Blair estimates that Frithuwald's

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[339] *VW*, ch. 40 (ed. Colgrave, 81).
[340] Whitelock, Wormald and Blair accept this charter as basically authentic, but others have raised doubts as to the amount of authentic material within the text. See: Whitelock, ed., *EHD*, no.54, 479–80; Scharer, *Königsurkunde*, 133–36; Wormald, "Conversion of England," 9 and 25; John Blair, "Frithuwold's kingdom and the origins of Surrey," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 97.
[341] S 1165.
[342] Bede, *HE* iv.6 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 355). For more on Eorcenwald, see: Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 56–7.
[343] Barking is described in the following chapters: Bede, *HE* iv.7–10 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 357–365). For an example of scholarship on Æthelburh and Barking, see: Lisa Weston, "The Saintly Female Body and the Landscape of Foundation in Anglo-Saxon Barking," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 43, no. 1 (2007): 12–25.
[344] For example: Whitelock, ed., *EHD*, 479–480.
[345] See: Wormald, "Bede, the *Bretwaldas*," 112; John Blair, "Frithuwold's kingdom and the origins of Surrey," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 105–7.
[346] Blair, "Frithuwold's kingdom," 105–6.

administrative territory encompassed lands in Surrey, parts of the Thames valley and Chilterns extending into Buckinghamshire.[347] I agree with Blair's argument because of further evidence I present in chapters three and four of this thesis. For this discussion, it is pertinent that both Frithuwald in S 1165 and Frithuric in a Peterborough document are marked as officials or subkings of Wulfhere and Æthelred, respectively.[348] Furthermore, attesting in the witness list of S 1165 are three more labelled subkings of Wulfhere: Osric, Wigheard, and Æthelwold. Osric can be identified as the above-mentioned king of the Hwiccan kingdom.[349] Unfortunately, Wigheard cannot be identified. However, Searle links subking Æthelwold with Æthelwealh, the king of the South Saxons.[350] If Searle is correct, this could confirm Æthelwealh was a subking for Wulfhere. Additionally, both Wulfhere and Æthelred had subkings in Surrey and in the kingdom of the Middle Angles.

The East Saxons

I now move to the kingdom of the East Saxons, or Essex, which borders the Middle Anglian kingdoms to the south and appears to have had deep ties to the Mercian royal family. This kingdom likely had a ruler who also married into Penda's family, much like Frithuwald of the Middle Angles in the last section. It seems Essex was seldom an independent polity, instead falling under varying *imperium* of the larger kingdoms.[351] This attraction to hold *imperium* over Essex may be ascribed to the kingdom's interests in and control of London, an emerging centre of trade, particularly in the last quarter of the seventh century. London was described by Bede as an emporium where many peoples, both local and foreign, gathered for trade and other economic considerations.[352] This is later confirmed when Bede relates the tale of Æthelred's Mercian *comes* who sold a Northumbrian named Imma to a Frisian in London after the battle of Trent in 679.[353] That Æthelred's *comes* travelled to London with the intent to trade could indicate continued Mercian presence in Essex at that time, or that both kingdoms were on friendly terms. If Maddicott is correct, the period of growing Mercian interest in Essex

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[347] Ibid., 107.
[348] Frithuric appears in what Stenton labels the 'Medeshamstede Memoranda' as *princeps* to Æthelred. See: Frank Stenton, "Medeshamstede and its Colonies," in *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England: Being the Collected Papers of Frank Merry Stenton*, ed. Doris Stenton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 181–82.
[349] Although, Scharer raises doubts as to this identification in conjunction with the other witnesses. I still believe Osric of S 1165 is the same Osric of the Hwicce. See: Scharer, *Königsurkunde*, 136.
[350] Searle, *Onomasticon*, 54. Wigheard could possibly be an anachronistic copy error, or a forger trying to pad the witness list.
[351] This territory could have extended into Middlesex and a portion of Hertfordshire, but evidence is not conclusive. See: Keith Bailey, "The Middle Saxons," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 108–22.
[352] Bede, *HE* ii.3 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 143). For more, see: Yorke, "East Saxons," 27–28; Bailey, "Middle Saxons," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 113; Maddicott, "London and Droitwich," 16.
[353] Bede, *HE* iv.22 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 403–5).

aligns with intensified trade in the London area taking place from approximately 675 to 725.[354] It was in Mercia's best economic interests to either gain Essex as an ally or as a territory in the wider Mercian hegemony. However, Mercia did not seem to gain influence in the kingdom of the East Saxons until Wulfhere's reign.

Previous to Mercian influence, Essex appears first under Kentish and then possibly Northumbrian influence through East Anglia. Kentish influence came in the form of familial connections. Ricule, King Æthelberht's sister, had married the East Saxon king and produced King Sæberht of Essex, who ruled during Augustine's mission.[355] After Æthelberht's death, his son Eadbald succeeded and lost what his father had gained, including control over the East Saxons.[356] After this, it appears that for a time, the East Saxon kings were independent.

However, East Saxon independence might have been lost during Oswiu's reign, when it appears that the East Anglian kingdom might have claimed *imperium* over their smaller neighbour to the west. Our first whisper of this possibility is King Sigeberht of Essex's friendship with Oswiu. We are informed by Bede that Sigeberht frequently travelled to Northumbria and that Oswiu highly encouraged the king to convert to Christianity. Sigeberht eventually did convert and was baptised at the Northumbrian royal *vill* of *Ad Murum*, which was also the site of Peada's conversion.[357] This could indicate that Oswiu had sponsored both kings, Sigeberht and Peada, and that they were under a Northumbrian obligation of some kind. Joseph Lynch, considering the social impacts of pre-Conquest sponsorship and godparenthood, groups sponsorship during the Christianisation process within diplomatic strategy because of its parentlike bonds.[358] Much like other forms of diplomatic relation building, the success of sponsorship in creating ties between two political units is dependent on the situation. However, this could be the cause of further proselytisation in Essex around this time. Within the same account of Sigeberht's conversion, we find Swithhelm, one of Sigeberht's successors and a possible co-ruler with Swithfrith, also receiving conversion. However, this took place at the East Anglian royal *vill* of Rendlesham under the sponsorship of King Æthelwold of East Anglia.[359] Yorke approaches Swithhelm's baptism at Rendlesham by suggesting that Æthelwold was in an alliance with Oswiu due to the placement of Cedd, a Northumbrian, as the East Saxon bishop.[360] If this is the case, which it is just as likely not, then whatever

[354] Maddicott, "London and Droitwich," 9–13.
[355] Bede, *HE* ii.3 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 142–3).
[356] Bede, *HE* ii.5 and 6 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 153–57).
[357] Bede, *HE* iii.21 and 22 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 279–283).
[358] Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship*, 205–6.
[359] Bede, *HE* iii.22 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 281–285).
[360] Yorke, "East Saxons," 32.

relationship East Anglia had with Essex was short-lived. When Wulfhere regained the Mercian throne, he quickly continued his father's plans of expansion.

Wulfhere's reign saw Mercian *imperium*'s first extension into Essex, and with it, another possible connection to the Mercian royal family. After the death of Swithhelm sometime around 663/4, Kings Sigehere and Sebbi succeeded to the East Saxon kingdom, with Bede remarking that both men were already subject to Wulfhere.[361] As discussed above, Wulfhere had certainly focused his attention on southeast England at this time with the inclusion of the South Saxons and Surrey, by way of marriages between Mercia and Kent, described in chapter three. With both Sigehere and Sebbi already under Mercian *imperium* when they succeeded, it is likely Wulfhere had been working toward diplomatic relations with Essex before Swithhelm's death in 663/4. This could indicate that Oswiu's bid for spiritual bonds with Essex rulers had likely failed because of the Mercian royal family's push to extend into East Saxon territory.

This relationship between Essex and Mercia may have involved marriage. If post-Conquest *vitae* preserve accurate information, Sigehere was possibly married to either an elite woman from the Hwicce or Mercian royal family, named Osyth.[362] The claims of the *vitae* are supported by essentially authentic charter evidence which has Sigehere's son, Offa, granting land in Hwiccan territory to Worcester.[363] Steven Bassett has completed an exhaustive examination of Offa of Essex's charter, and concluded that some familial connection is likely, although he argues for a Hwiccan link.[364] It is of particular note, however, that Offa is styled as *subregulus* in third-person statements.[365] If the scribe was recording and preserving original documents, this likely confirms Mercian *imperium* over Essex because of the similarity to other contemporary charters which use *subregulus* when referring to rulers in the Mercian hegemony. With some family relation likely between the Hwicce or Mercia and Essex, this marriage could have taken place either during Wulfhere or Æthelred's reign to confirm Mercian and East Saxon relations.

The question is whether Mercian relations with Essex continued during West Saxon aggression in southeast England during Æthelred's reign in the mid to late 680s. I will discuss

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[361] Bede, *HE* iii.30 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 323). The date of Swithhelm's death might suggest he died in the plague. For more on this see: J.R. Maddicott, "Plague in Seventh-Century England," *Past & Present* 156 (1997): 7–54.

[362] Discussed further in chapter three, his connection to the Mercians is preserved in legends surrounding St. Osyth. For the reconstructed *vitae* of St. Osyth, please see: D. Bethell, "The Lives of St. Osyth of Essex and St. Osyth of Aylesbury," *Analecta Bollandiana* 88 (1970): 75–127.

[363] S 64. The charter states that Offa was king of the Mercians, but this is generally considered a later scribal misunderstanding.

[364] Steven Bassett, "Offa, King of the East Saxons, and His West Midlands Land Grants," *Midland History* 40, no. 1 (2015): 1–23.

[365] Bassett, "Offa, King of East Saxons," 12–13.

this West Saxon activity below. It seems Mercian *imperium* over Essex waned beginning in 686 during King Cædwalla of Wessex's destruction of Kent. This thought is based on a questionable composite charter (S 233) in which mention of Sigehere invading Kent is made in the body. The evidence is tenuous, but the possibility Sigehere assisted Cædwalla in gaining Kent remains. However, Cædwalla's *imperium* over southeast England was fleeting. He abdicated the West Saxon throne in 688 to retire in Rome, and Æthelred returned to confirming charters by the following year.[366] Sigehere disappears from the record, so it is assumed that he either fell from power or died.[367] His co-ruler, Sebbi, continued ruling Essex until around 693/4 and appears in the witness list of his son, King Swæfheard of Kent's grant to Domne Eafe (Æbbe).[368] Swæfheard's placement on the Kentish throne could possibly be attributed to Æthelred's interference. Either way, Mercian control over southeast England, including Essex, was secure after Cædwalla abdicated the West Saxon throne.

Before concluding this section, I would like to offer a few observations. It appears that Mercian expansion interests began as early as Penda's reign beginning in 626. This may have been done as a means of protecting the core lands of Mercia located in the Trent River valley by creating a 'buffer' zone using smaller political units. Except for the smaller kingdoms bordering Mercia in the north, it appears Mercia was able to incorporate most of the surrounding kingdoms into their hegemony by the end of Æthelred's reign. This process was not stable. In fact, Mercia lost and regained areas until about 688, when Cædwalla of Wessex abdicated. Attempting to create stable relations with their subkingdoms, Mercian rulers often placed family members in reigning positions or created a familial bond through marriage. It is these marriages which I focus on in chapter three. While I have demonstrated the extent of Mercian *imperium* and a method of Mercian rulership in their subkingdoms, I have yet to explain Mercian interactions with those kingdoms which resisted and were Mercia's match in power. Therefore, the next section will detail the political climate of the seventh century.

2.4 – Mercian Growth and Expansion: The Political Context for Mercian Relations with Northumbria, East Anglia, Kent and Wessex

My thesis reinserts Mercian elite women into the political histories of the seventh century, but this requires a base understanding of the political climate of the period. For now, my discussions of the seventh-century political climate are necessarily patrilineal. Nevertheless, understanding these patrilineal histories will elucidate how elite women operated in, and were

[366] S 10, 12, 65, 1248 and 1783.
[367] Yorke, "East Saxons," 20.
[368] S 10. See: *St. Augustine's Abbey*, ed. Kelly, 139–46.

affected by, political situations traditionally only ascribed to men, as discussed in later chapters. I have already discussed and established the members of the Mercian royal family, the extent of the Mercian hegemony, and Mercian patterns of rulership through familial networks. In this section, I turn to Mercia's political interactions with the Northumbrian kingdoms. After this, I will move to Mercia's political relationships with the kingdoms of Kent and East Anglia.

2.4.1 – Mercia and the Northumbrian Kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira

I begin this discussion of seventh-century political histories with the kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira because, as I shall show in the coming chapters, the Mercian elite family shared extensive kinship networks with these kingdoms. I choose to show separation between the two kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia, which constituted the combined Northumbria. I do this because the integration of the two kingdoms appears to have been far from smooth. By acknowledging two separate kingdoms, I have been able to understand seventh-century events in a new light. Mercian interactions with Bernicia and Deira seem to have fluctuated between periods of tense peace and all out conflict during most of the seventh century. The earliest period of documented conflict began during King Edwin's (c. 586–633) reign after Penda's rise to power in the late 620s. This period of turbulence continued until slightly after the battle at the river Trent (c. 679).[369] Our interpretations of these conflicts have certainly been influenced by the available sources for Mercian and Northumbrian interaction: the *HE*, *HB*, *ASC*, and the *VW*. Despite this, it appears many of the conflicts between Mercia and Northumbria can be reduced to similar land interests and kingdom expansion. Rulers of the seventh-century Northumbrian kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia not only had interests in Brittonic kingdoms to the north and west, but also pushed into kingdoms south of the Humber River.[370] This Northumbrian encroachment into Mercian territories in turn caused conflict between the two kingdoms.

The first generally acknowledged ruler to expand Northumbrian *imperium* south of the Humber, including into Mercia, was Edwin of Deira. This belief can be attributed to Bede's list of kings holding *imperium*, which lists Edwin as the first Northumbrian king to hold this distinction. I have already discussed at length the issues surrounding Bede's *imperium* list above. I contend that, instead of Edwin, the previous ruler of Northumbria, King Æthelfrith (d. 617) from the kingdom of Bernicia, was first to expand into territories south of the Humber.

[369] Bede, *HE* iv.21 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 400–1).
[370] Bede described this river as a natural boundary. Bede, *HE* ii.5 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 149).

While his activities were mainly confined to northern Brittonic kingdoms such as the Gododdin or Dal Riata, glimpses of military action south of the Humber remain.[371] His militaristic actions support the expansion of Northumbrian *imperium* earlier than Edwin's reign, and also helps to explain some of the earliest familial connections between Mercia and Northumbria.

Events surrounding Edwin's exile allude to Æthelfrith's earlier expansion of *imperium* or, at the least, militaristic ventures beyond the Humber. Edwin's exile is detailed in chapter two of the *HE* where a picture of this period is subtly shaped.[372] As I argue in the next chapter, Æthelfrith, the king of Bernicia succeeded to Deira after his father, Æthelric, around 593 which forced Edwin, an heir to the Deiran throne, into exile. Æthelfrith subsequently married Edwin's sister Acha, but he needed to eliminate Edwin to further secure his claims to Deira.[373] Assassination attempts forced Edwin to wander while in exile to avoid Æthelfrith's detection. Unable to remain in any kingdom for long, Edwin went to whichever royal court would accept him. The first court he sought refuge at appears to be the Welsh-Brittonic kingdom of Gwynedd. Later Welsh poetry alludes that Edwin resided for a time at King Cadfan of Gwynedd's court.[374] Æthelfrith attacked and demolished the city of C*aerlegion* (Chester) sometime between 613–616, likely after discovering Edwin's presence in Gwynedd and Mercia.[375] C*aerlegion* can be located in what would become, or was the kingdom of the Wreocensæte, discussed above. Higham attributes Æthelfrith's demolishing of C*aerlegion* as the breaking or diminishment of Mercian and Brittonic power in this area and the cause of Edwin's flight from Mercia.[376]

Æthelfrith's destruction of C*aerlegion* not only indicates earlier Northumbrian influence south of the Humber, but could also signal the beginning of extended Mercian and Northumbrian tensions that appeared during the seventh century. Tensions began after Æthelfrith's destruction of C*aerlegion*. It appears likely that Mercia and the Britons submitted to Æthelfrith's greater force, becoming a subkingdom of Northumbria rather than being exterminated. The *HB* claims that Penda was the first Mercian king to separate Mercia from

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[371] Æthelfrith's activities in Dal Riata are described in: Bede, *HE* i.34 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 116–17). His activity in Gododdin, a small kingdom between the Forth and Tyne, is implicitly stated in the *HB* based on the location of Bamburgh: *HB* ch. 63 (ed. Morris, 38) and supported by Bede, *HE* iii.6 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 230–1).
[372] Bede, *HE* ii.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 177–83).
[373] Bede, *HE* ii.12 and iii.6 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 177 and 231).
[374] Cadfan was Cædwallon's father. For the specific Welsh Triad, see: *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*: the triads of the island of Britain, ed. Rachel Bromwich, 4th ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014): 52–58. For Edwin's time in Mercia and East Anglia, see: Bede, *HE* ii.14 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 187) and ii.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 177).
[375] Bede, *HE* ii.2 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 141). The *ASC* E gives a date of 605 (ed. Irvine, 22–3), however, the *AnnCam* give a dating of 613 (ed. Morris). Most scholars agree that the battle at C*aerlegion* took place sometime between 613 and 616.
[376] N.J Higham, *An English empire: Bede and the early Anglo-Saxon kings* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 78–9.

"the kingdom of the Northerners".[377] Additionally, the location of the final battle between Edwin and Æthelfrith was in Mercian territory, described by Bede as "on the Mercian border on the east bank of the river Idle".[378] Despite the claims of the *HB*, Mercia's submission to Æthelfrith was likely only a span of approximately three or four years (613/15–617).[379] However, it is possible Edwin was able to continue Northumbrian control. After Æthelfrith's death at the battle near the river Idle, Edwin regained the throne of Deira while also maintaining the combined kingdom of Northumbria, although his means of achieving this is unknown. What is crucial to note, is that these early interactions between Mercia and Northumbria, in combination with Mercia's close relationships with Brittonic kingdoms, probably influenced Mercia's affinal choices. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

Edwin's period of exile in Gwynedd, Mercia and East Anglia certainly shaped his political motives as Northumbrian king and affected his interactions with Mercia. Participating in other royal courts during exile would have given him a unique understanding of their social and economic status. Gaining rich kingdoms, such as Gwynedd and Mercia, as either a tributary or subkingdoms would have enriched Edwin's own holdings and coffers.[380] Expansion into and gaining the submission of kingdoms south of the Humber became Edwin's political goal after being restored to the Northumbrian throne. According to Bede's claims in the *HE*, Edwin was successful at gaining *imperium* over all of the inhabitants of Britain, both Angles and Britons, to include the Isle of Anglesey and Man, both Brittonic holdings.[381] The only kingdom reportedly not under his *imperium* was Kent, but their support was assured through Edwin's marriage to Kentish princess, Æthelburh.[382] Bede, trying to support his claims of Edwin's greatness, wrote that his reign was prophesied by a heavenly visitor during Edwin's exile at Rædwald's court, and we are told there was peace throughout his realm.[383] Bede's claims, however, which work to signify Edwin's complete control, must be tempered. The willingness of Edwin's tributary kingdoms which made up his *imperium* over Britain, much lauded by Bede, shows signs of strain. Brittonic sources allude to Edwin's tyranny, and despite Bede's laudatory statements, we catch glimpses within the *HE* of reactions against Edwin's *imperium*.

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[377] *HB* ch. 65 (ed. Morris, 39).
[378] Bede, *HE* ii.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 181).
[379] The dating of the battle near the river Idle is given as 617 by the *ASC* E (ed. Irvine, 23).
[380] Gwynedd, in particular, was part of the rich and important Irish-Sea zone that maintained trade and connections. For more on trade in the Irish Sea, see: T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons 350–1064* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013); Nancy Edwards, *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1990), 68–98, particularly 96–98.
[381] Bede, *HE* ii.5 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 148–9).
[382] Bede, *HE* ii.9 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 162–3).
[383] Bede, *HE* ii.16 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 192–3).

There are two instances which highlight dissatisfaction with Edwin's reign, which could illuminate the shadows of early Mercian affinal and non-marriage unions, discussed in chapter three. The first, and earliest sign of resistance to Edwin's *imperium* was an assassination attempt orchestrated by King Cwichelm of the West Saxons during the Easter feast in 626.[384] Whether Cwichelm and the West Saxons were subject to Edwin is up for debate.[385] However, I believe that Cwichelm was indeed chafing from Edwin's control because of the other signs of resistance discussed here. It appears Edwin lost no time recombining the kingdoms of Northumbria after his battle with his predecessor Æthelfrith in 617. While Bede does not elaborate on the early days of Edwin's reign, there were other members of the royal Deiran and Bernician families, particularly Æthelfrith's children, who would pose a threat to Edwin's claims. Regardless, Edwin quickly gained control of the situation and shortly began his quest for an expanded *imperium*. Edwin's time in exile, as I have stated above, likely assisted him in achieving this goal. Furthermore, having a (re-)subjugated Mercia surely made staging any military excursions below the Humber easier. Cwichelm's reaction to Edwin's *imperium* highlights the lengths to which this king was willing to go in order to free himself and his kingdom from Northumbrian rule, if indeed this was the case. Cwichelm's assassination attempt was unsuccessful, but the second attempt to overthrow Edwin succeeded.

The second instance highlighting dissatisfaction and resistance to Edwin's control emerged with the 633 rebellion of King Cædwallon (Cædwalla) of Gwynedd (r. 625–634) and his ally, Penda of Mercia. Both rulers had legitimate cause for anger with Edwin. As I stated above, it is likely that Edwin resided in Gwynedd at some point during his exile (c. 604–617). Later Welsh poetry alludes to Edwin's time at the court of Cædwallon's father, Cadfan, sometime during his youth.[386] Both princes had apparently grown up together and counted themselves friends. However, despite this supposed friendship, Edwin later took the Isle of Anglesey, part of Cædwallon's kingdom of Gwynedd. The *AnnCam* entry for 629 states Cadwallon was besieged on the island of Glannauc, which lies a short distance from Anglesey.[387] It is very possible that this occurred during Edwin's push into Gwynedd, giving us a date range for Edwin's activities in Mercia and the Brittonic kingdoms. This action in conjunction with the assassination attempt in 626 illustrates that Edwin aggressively gained *imperium* in a relatively short period.

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[384] Bede, *HE* ii.9 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 165). For more on Cwichelm, see: Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 143–4.
[385] Barbara Yorke assumes overlordship, while Higham proposes the political climate of the south as cause for the attempt. Please see: Yorke, *King and Kingdoms*, 81; Higham, *An English empire*, 81.
[386] This theory comes from a fourteenth-century Welsh triad, which is discussed below.
[387] *AnnCam* 629 (ed. Morris, 86).

Reaction and resistance to Edwin's presence was equally swift. Penda and Cadwallon met Edwin in battle at *Hæthfelth* (Hatfield Chase) in the kingdom of Lindsey in 633, where Edwin was slain. Additionally, resentment for Edwin's reign also appears within his own household. Eadfrith, Edwin's son with Mercian princess Cwenburh, deserted Northumbria in favour of siding with his Mercian kinsman, Penda.[388] These instances combine to show a less than perfect picture of Edwin's reign, and his actions likely influenced Mercian choices of alliance and union partners.

The battle at *Hæthfelth* and the slaying of Edwin effectively marks the rise of Penda and the beginning of the Mercian kingdom's own expansion during the seventh century.[389] It is also the beginning of increased Mercian and Northumbrian interactions. With Edwin's death, Penda had regained autonomy for his kingdom and shed Northumbrian overlordship which the kingdom had chaffed under since the reign of Æthelfrith. After Cædwallon and Penda's success at *Hæthfelth*, Cædwallon pushed further into Northumbria ravaging the countryside for approximately a year. Northumbria once again separated into the two kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira, with Æthelfrith's son, Eanfrith, succeeding to Bernicia, and Osric, the son of Edwin's uncle, succeeding to Deira.[390] Their reigns were short-lived, both falling victim to Cædwallon's wrath while he ravaged the Northumbrian territories. What is unknown is whether Penda remained with his ally in the north, or if he returned to Mercia. The *ASC* E describes Penda accompanying Cædwallon in his destruction of Northumbria, but no contemporary source confirms this.[391] Either way, Penda's ally never returned to Gwynedd. Oswald arrived, likely from Ireland or a Pictish kingdom, with an army slaying Cadwallon at *Denisesburn* (Heavenfield) in 634.[392]

After avenging his brother Eanfrith's death at *Deniseburn*, Oswald (r. 634–641) succeeded to the combined Northumbrian throne through his patrilineal and matrilineal connections to both Deira and Bernicia. But, despite Bede's claims that Oswald held sway "over all the peoples and kingdoms of Britain," Penda and the kingdom of Mercia certainly could not be numbered among these 'peoples'.[393] Penda's push for expansion in all directions

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[388] As discussed above. Bede, *HE* ii.20 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 203) and ii.14 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 187).
[389] Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 104–5.
[390] Bede, *HE* iii.1 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 213).
[391] *ASC* E 633 (ed. Irvine, 24–5)
[392] Bede, *HE* iii.1–2 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 212–17) and Adomnán, *Vita Columbae*, i.1 (ed. Anderson and Anderson, 16–7). Later this battle site, located near Hexham, became significant in the cult of St. Oswald. For more, see: David Rollason, *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 113–4; Alan Thacker, "*Membra Disjecta*: the Division of the Body and the Diffusion of the Cult," in *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1995), 98–9; Scott Hutcheson MacKenzie, "Saint Oswald, Christ and the Dream of the Rood: Mutable Signs at a Cultural Crossroad" (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 2010), 170–95.
[393] Bede, *HE* iii.6 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 230–1).

meant Mercia was becoming a major kingdom in the Midlands and the Mercian structure of rulership ensured familial control even in recently gained territories.

Bede, more interested in describing Oswald's cult and miracles, does not elucidate aggressions between Northumbria and Mercia during Oswald's reign.[394] However, Oswald was certainly present in south England which would have affected the Mercian royal family's interactions with other kingdoms. The location of Oswald's death may illustrate some of these interactions. After approximately nine years, Oswald was slain in battle against Penda in 642 at *Maserfelth*.[395] Scholars generally identify *Maserfelth* with Oswestry located in modern Shropshire along the Welsh border, although there is some dispute.[396] This area lay within the borderlands of the Brittonic kingdom of Powys, a kingdom lying between Mercia and Gwynedd, and probably by this time, the kingdom of the Wreocensæte, discussed above.[397] This places *Maserfelth* well within Mercia and their allies' lands. What Oswald was doing in this area is unknown. Its location may indicate that Oswald had been attempting to gain or regain *imperium* in this area. But whatever his intentions, Mercia and their Brittonic allies reacted violently. Charles-Edwards suggests that although Bede never explicitly indicates an alliance between Mercia and the Brittonic kingdoms at *Maserfelth*, his choice of wording suggests Penda's force was of similar makeup to that at *Hæthfelth* where Edwin was slain.[398] The *HB* notes that Penda lost his brother and possible coruler, Eowa, during this battle.[399] How this affected the Mercian royal family, in particular elite women, is uncertain. But surely the family dynamic of Mercian co-rulers and subkings shifted after this battle.

Evidence for Mercian expansion and Northumbrian tensions is better after Oswald's death at *Maserfelth* and the succession of his brother Oswiu (r. 641–670. Oswiu's reign is not only a period of increasing conflict with Mercia, but also increased connection of familial networks between the two kingdoms. After Oswald's death, Northumbria split once more into the component kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira, with Oswiu ruling Bernicia and Oswine, a relative of Edwin, ruling Deira.[400] It appears to have been an uneasy co-rulership because

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[394] Oswald, his reign, and postmortem saintly miracles are described in: Bede, *HE* iii.1–13.
[395] In the Welsh sources *Maserfelth* is identified as Co*gwy*: Bede, *HE* iii.9 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 242–43); *HB*, ch. 65 (ed. Morris, 39).
[396] After Gelling questioned the general assumption of Oswestery, Stancliffe re-examined the evidence supporting this claim and found it to be sound: Clare Stancliffe, "Where was Oswald killed?," in *Oswald: From Northumbrian King to European Saint*, ed. Stancliffe and Cambridge (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1995): 84–96. For an opposing view, see: Gelling, "The Early History of Western Mercia," in *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. Bassett 188–9. Thacker proposes a location in the kingdom of Lindsey: Thacker, "*Membra Disjecta*," 99.
[397] Borderland as defined by: Lindy Brady, *Writing the Welsh Borderlands in Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2017).
[398] While I agree with the general premise of his argument, I am not convinced of other elements such as Penda's lack of kingship until 642 and Oswald's solely Bernician kinship: Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 391–93.
[399] *HB* ch. 65 (ed. Morris, 80).
[400] Bede, *HE* iii.14 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 255–7).

Oswiu had Oswine killed in 651 after he had ruled Deira for seven years.[401] What is important here is that Penda appears to have increased the intensity of his attacks on Northumbria after Oswine's murder. Penda is found a few times in the northern reaches of Bernicia and beyond, harrying the Northumbrian kingdom. In two of these instances, Penda was laying siege to the Bernician royal city of Bamburgh and/or the surrounding area.[402] The other instance, in 655, saw him beyond this point, possibly as far north as the Firth of Forth, where he forced Oswiu to make a payment to end hostilities.[403] At this point, Oswiu had relinquished his son, Ecgfrith, to Penda to act as a hostage and he remained in the care of Penda's queen, Cynewise.[404] After finishing the campaign at the Forth, Penda made his way back to Mercia through Bernicia and had reached Deira when Oswiu attacked him in the district of *Loidis* (Leeds) near the River *Winwæd*.[405] Oswiu had finally had enough of Penda's attacks and expansion attempts at the expense of his kingdom. As I will show in chapter three, he had likely planned for Penda's demise for an extended period of time. Penda's reign and his turbulent relations with the Northumbrian kingdoms came to an end at the battle of *Winwæd*. On 15 November in 655, Penda was slain in battle by Oswiu's smaller force.

After the battle of *Winwæd* and Penda's death, Oswiu was able to push his influence south of the Humber for a brief time. Oswiu gained direct control over Mercia, which he broke into two parts: north Mercia and south Mercia. Peada, Penda's son who had married Oswiu's daughter Alhflæd, remained in control of the south Mercians, a close approximation to the Middle Anglian kingdom over which he already ruled.[406] Oswiu assumed control over northern Mercia and placed his loyal *principes* in positions of power. Peada did not remain king of the south Mercians for long because he was murdered by his wife, Alhflæd, at the Easter feast the following year (656).[407] Oswiu also did not retain control of Mercia for long. Three years after *Winwæd*, the Mercian *duces* Immin, Eafa, and Eadberht organised a coup and placed Penda's other son, Wulfhere (r. 658–675), on the throne. This was the final instance of a Northumbrian king who could claim *imperium* over the Mercians.

Where the other members of the Mercian royal family were during Oswiu's *imperium* is unknown. Cynewise only appears once in the *HE*, so her whereabouts are a mystery.[408] But it is likely that she had gone into hiding with Penda's other young children or returned to her natal

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[401] Bede, *HE* iii.14 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 255–7); *ASC* A 651 (ed. Bately, 29) and E 650 (ed. Irvine, 26).
[402] Bede, *HE* iii.16–17 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 263–65).
[403] *HB* ch. 64 and 65 (ed. Morris, 79). For discussion on the possible locations, see: Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 7, no. 30 and 394.
[404] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 291).
[405] Ibid. (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 292–3).
[406] Bede, *HE* iii.21 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 278–9).
[407] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 294–5).
[408] Ibid.

kingdom. It is possible that they fled to the kingdom of the Magonsæte in the west. If Finberg's dates for Merewalh (c. 625–685) are correct, he may have already controlled the kingdom, and with its location in the western part of Mercia, it was ideal for concealment.[409] Either way we know Penda's children survive because they feature in the latter half of the seventh century.

The turbulent relations between Mercia and Northumbria appear to cool somewhat after Wulfhere regained the throne and while Oswiu was still king of Northumbria. Higham speculates that Oswiu and Wulfhere formed a fragile truce with Mercia recognising a continued Northumbrian 'overkingship'.[410] However, I do not find this plausible because Higham does not account for Wulfhere's own *imperium* over the southern kingdoms which appears to be the area of his focus during his reign. Simply put, tensions between Mercia and Northumbria cooled because the Mercian royal family shifted focus to gaining influence south of the Humber. Furthermore, as I discuss in the next chapter, the familial ties between the two families were effectively ended due to Oswiu's decision to manipulate marriage customs. Wulfhere's focus on expanding Mercian *imperium* in the south and the royal family's lack of kinship with the Northumbrian kingdoms would shift when Oswiu's son, Ecgfrith, succeeded.

With Ecgfrith's reign, we witness renewed tensions between the two kingdoms and yet another renewal of familial connection. It is unclear whether *imperium* played a role in the increased disputes, but a battle which occurred sometime between 673 and 675 seems to have reignited tensions as elaborated in the *VW*. The writer claims that Wulfhere was the responsible party for this renewed aggression, stating that Wulfhere had gathered all the southern nations of Britain to force Northumbria to pay tribute, much like his late father Penda had once done.[411] Ecgfrith, not one to back down, met Wulfhere's army at an unknown location and was ultimately victorious. As a consequence, Wulfhere lost the kingdom of Lindsey to Northumbria, a coveted subkingdom, and instead of gaining tribute from Ecgfrith, Wulfhere was forced to pay tribute to the Northumbrian king.

Whether this was a case of Ecgfrith gaining *imperium* over the kingdoms of Mercia, or simply Wulfhere paying a penalty and relinquishing Lindsey is up for debate.[412] I am more skeptical of claims for Northumbrian *imperium* over Mercia because of the appearance of Lindsey in the negotiated terms and Ecgfrith's lack of appearance in Bede's *imperium* list. Control over the subkingdom of Lindsey appears to have been a substantially contested point during this conflict. Lindsey had shifted between being under Northumbrian and Mercian

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[409] Finburg, *ECWM*, 217.
[410] Higham, *An English empire*, 68.
[411] *VW* ch. 20 (ed. Colgrave, 42–3).
[412] Stenton was more skeptical of claims for Ecgfrith's *imperium* over Mercia: Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 85. Yorke accepts Northumbrian *imperium* over Mercia: Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 105.

control several times throughout the seventh century. While Bede uses shifts in control over this subkingdom to explain changing affiliations in the see of Lindsey, he was ultimately not concerned with elaborating lay outcomes.[413] However, we do know that by Æthelred of Mercia's reign, during the last quarter of the seventh century, Mercia had regained possession of Lindsey.

Furthermore, Ecgfrith does not feature in Bede's list of *imperium*-holding kings which has implications for both Wulfhere and Æthelred's reigns.[414] This is an odd fact because Bede had been promoting Northumbrian kings of the past as exemplar to the present and future.[415] Only the *VW* states that Ecgfrith had claim of *imperium* over the southern kingdoms, but only after Wulfhere's death in 675, which took place a short time after the battle. This claim for Northumbrian *imperium* in the *VW* is likely attributable to Bishop Wilfrid who was still on good terms with Ecgfrith at the time of this event. Throughout the *VW*, there is a clear dichotomy between Ecgfrith's two queens, Æthelthryth and Iurminburh. At the time of the battle, Ecgfrith was still married to the saintly Æthelthryth, and therefore, was portrayed as a righteous king. This shifts after his marriage to Iurminburh when she is blamed for Wilfrid's fall from royal favour. For these two reasons, the Mercian kingdom likely had retained autonomy despite Wulfhere having paid tribute to Ecgfrith after the battle described in the *VW*.

After Wulfhere's death for unknown reasons in 675, his brother Æthelred (r. 675–704) succeeded to the Mercian throne. Shortly after his ascension, Æthelred ended the hostilities that, since his father Penda's rule, had been a regular feature of political relationships between Mercia and Northumbria. The final battle fought between Ecgfrith and Æthelred took place in 679 near the river Trent which runs through what would have been the kingdom of Lindsey.[416] At this battle, Ecgfrith's younger brother, Ælfwine, was killed which ultimately increased tensions between the two kingdoms. Bede makes particular note that this young, Northumbrian prince was beloved in both Mercia and Northumbria because Æthelred had married Osthryth, the sister of Ecgfrith and Ælfwine. It is unknown when this marriage took place, but it may have been contracted at the conclusion of the battle lost by Wulfhere sometime between 673 and 675. It is important to this section that relations between Mercia and Northumbria before Trent had likely been less hostile if Ælfwine was able to travel between the two kingdoms. Ælfwine's death at Trent would facilitate an intervention by Archbishop Theodore, who operated as a mediator between the two families. His involvement in this conflict was likely due to the shared kinship connections. Archbishop Theodore was able

[413] Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede*, 160.
[414] Bede, *HE* iv.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 370–1).
[415] Higham attributes this to the closeness of Ecgfrith's reign to Bede's present. Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede*, 148–69, particularly 160.
[416] Bede, *HE* iv.21 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 400–1).

to negotiate that Æthelred pay *wergild* to Ecgfrith for the death of his brother and in return Ecgfrith had to hand control of Lindsey back to Mercia. Bede notes that peace was maintained for a long time between the two kings and their kingdoms. Until Æthelred's abdication in 704, this remained the case.[417]

The ending of Mercian and Northumbrian tensions with Æthelred's reign — possibly assisted by his marriage to Northumbrian princess Osthryth — concluded almost seventy-five years of turbulent relations. Northumbrian rulers, beginning with Æthelfrith, interested in spreading their influence and *imperium* to kingdoms south of the Humber, came into conflict with Mercia, one of the largest kingdoms. Until Wulfhere took the Mercian throne in 658, a handful of Northumbrian kings were able to gain some level of control over Mercia but never for long. Æthelfrith certainly had a level of *imperium* over Mercia beginning after his victory at C*aerlegion* indicated by Edwin's flight to East Anglia. Edwin later reversed his misfortune when he maintained, or more likely, regained *imperium* over not only Mercia but also Mercian allies. However, his position was not as secure as Bede describes with Brittonic sources regarding him as a tyrant. Additionally, Edwin's methods of control eventually resulted in his death at *Hæthfelth* by a Mercian and Brittonic combined forces led by Cadwallon and Penda. Edwin's successor, Oswald, lost control of Mercia despite slaying Cadwallon at Heavenfield. Despite Bede's claims of control much like Edwin's, the extent of Oswald's *imperium* cannot be definitively determined. But he certainly had some level of power, although not in Mercia. Penda had turned his focus elsewhere during most of Oswald's reign. When Oswald attempted to (re)expand into the Brittonic kingdoms, Penda and his Brittonic allies prematurely ended his reign on the battlefield. Oswald's brother and successor, Oswiu, reclaimed *imperium* over Mercia, but only for a brief period of three years after Penda's death in 655. After Oswiu lost control in a coup which saw Mercian nobles crown Wulfhere, Penda's son, Northumbria fully lost *imperium* over the Midlands kingdom. Although, tensions and skirmishes between the two kingdoms still frequently ignited until Archbishop Theodore secured a peace in 679 after the battle at the Trent.

The seemingly ever-present tumultuous relations between Mercia and Northumbria would dictate the political climate in which Mercian elite women operated during the seventh century. Tensions between the two kingdoms and their royal families would have been particularly distressing for the elite women who were married into or out of the Mercian royal family. Surely, most suffered from a sense of conflicting loyalties at the outbreak of war, but without more explicit evidence for the emotions of seventh-century women, we can only speculate on this front. I will discuss these marriages more fully in the next chapter, one of

[417] Bede, *HE* v.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 566–7).

which I have already mentioned — Æthelred's marriage to Osthryth. However, Mercia's political maneuvers in the southern kingdoms, particularly Kent and East Anglia, were facilitated through other affinal connections. But before this, I still need to briefly highlight Mercian actions and political relationships in the south.

2.4.2 – Mercian Political Interactions in South Britain: East Anglia, Kent and Wessex

Mercian *imperium* over smaller political units, which I discussed above, were particularly concentrated in southern England. This led to tense conflict and varying circumstances for the smaller kingdoms caught in the middle. Because of the Mercian family's form of rulership which placed family members on the throne of smaller subkingdoms within the Mercian *imperium* and/or as administrative agents, it is important to discuss the Mercian royal family's dealings in this area. It is particularly relevant to later chapters which illustrate elite women's importance to the smooth operation of Mercia's extended hegemony. Wessex has some of the earliest evidence for coming into conflict with Mercia during Penda's initial expansion attempts. I suggested above that for a brief time after 628 and the battle at Cirencester, Wessex may have fallen under Mercian *imperium*. Submission may have been part of the terms drawn up by Cynegils and Cwichelm, along with the loss of Hwiccan territories (if this is indeed when Mercia gained the Hwicce as one of their subkingdoms). Furthermore, it is also possible that this campaign was fought at the insistence of King Edwin whose *imperium* may have extended through Mercian territories. This same Cwichelm was possibly the West Saxon king who had sent assassins to kill Edwin two years prior in 626.[418] This could indicate that Penda's campaign against Wessex in 628 was Edwin's response to Cwichelm's attack.[419] If this is the case, West Saxon submission was to Northumbria and not to Mercia.[420] However, later events may indicate that influence shifted to Mercia shortly after this event.

Edwin's Northumbrian *imperium* over territories south of the Humber was short-lived due to the Mercian and Welsh-Brittonic reaction in 633 to Edwin's aggressive methods of rulership. It is unknown where Penda focused his attentions for the year in which Cadwallon, his ally, ravaged Northumbria. But it may be possible that Penda had set his sights on expanding

[418] Bede, *HE* ii.9 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 164–5). Higham interprets this assassination attempt to be a response to Edwin's marriage to Kentish princess Æthelburh: Higham, *English Empire*, 81.
[419] Bede, *HE* ii.9 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 166–7).
[420] Higham believes Cwichelm was killed for his actions against Edwin. However, this minimises Bede's statement that collaborators were either killed or forced to submit. Cwichelm likely had to submit under unfavourable conditions and is the same Cwichelm that died in 636 according to the *ASC*. See: *ASC* A 636 (ed. Bately, 28); Higham, *English Empire*, 159–60.

his own *imperium* during the chaos and collapse of the Northumbrian hegemony. Nascent Mercian expansion could be a cause for Cynegils' baptism under Oswald's sponsorship in 635, and the subsequent marriage between the Northumbrian king and his daughter.[421] The West Saxon ruler may have been seeking Northumbrian assistance to deal with Mercian threats.[422] We are unaware if the West Saxon bid for Northumbrian alliance worked to quell supposed Mercian aggression. However, this possible alliance between Northumbria and Wessex was temporary. Penda and his Mercian forces met with Oswald at *Maserfelth* in 642, slaying the Northumbrian king, and possibly his West Saxon ally Cynegils.[423]

This discussion of Mercian dealings with Wessex is important to this chapter and thesis because it illuminates possible Mercian rulership strategies that I discuss more fully in chapters three and four. Here, I want to focus on a particular West Saxon ruler, his affinal connection to Penda's sister, and how it affected relations with the Mercian royal family. Upon Cynegils death, his son Cenwealh (r. 642–672) succeeded to the West Saxon throne, and there are signs that his ascension may have not been secure. In the beginning years of his reign, Cenwealh was married to Penda's unnamed sister. Both Bede and the *ASC* mention that Cenwealh would eventually repudiate Penda's sister, and Penda, enraged on behalf of his sibling, expelled Cenwealh from his kingdom for a period of three years.[424] It is possible that Cenwealh had found it necessary to seek a powerful ally to secure his reign and he found this ally in Penda. Agreeing to marry Penda's sister, he likely began to chafe under Mercian *imperium* — if *Mercian imperium* is indeed what transpired — and in an attempt to extricate himself from familial bonds and alliance with Mercia he divorced Penda's sister. After Cenwealh was ousted, it is assumed that Mercia had control of Wessex during his exile, but there is no further information to confirm this assumption.

After the divorce, Cenwealh fled to the kingdom of East Anglia and the court of King Anna, who was strong enough to oppose Penda at this time. Not much is known about his time in East Anglia except that he accepted the Christian faith and was baptised.[425] Furthermore, there are no contemporary sources which detail how Cenwealh was able to regain Wessex after this three-year period. William of Malmesbury, writing in the twelfth century, claims Cenwealh won back the West Saxon throne through military force.[426] Whether this is correct or not, it is a possibility if Cenwealh had the backing of King Anna. Despite Penda's apparent

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[421] Bede, *HE* iii.7 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 233) and *ASC* A 635 (ed. Bately, 28).
[422] Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 136.
[423] The *ASC* marks Cynegils dying in the same year as *Maserfelth*. See: *ASC* A 642 (ed. Bately, 29) and 641 E (ed. Irvine, 25–6); Bede, *HE* iii.9 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 241–43).
[424] Bede, *HE* iii.7 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 233–35); *ASC* A 645 (ed. Bately, 29) and A 658 (ed. Bately, 30).
[425] Bede, *HE* iii.7 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 235); *ASC* A 646 (ed. Bately, 29).
[426] *GRA* i.19.1 (ed. Mynors, Thomson, and Winterbottom, 42–3).

military accomplishments, Bede did inform us he ruled with "varying success".[427] Cenwealh's possible militaristic win to gain back his kingdom from Mercia, was likely only a small loss for the Mercian family whose influence expanded rapidly throughout the south after this event.

This loss of *imperium* over Wessex did not end Mercian interests in, nor expansion into, West Saxon territories. Bede remarks that Cenwealh suffered from continual losses at the hands of his enemies during his reign.[428] Likely, these enemies were Mercians or smaller kingdoms in the expanded Mercian hegemony. Mercian aggression had not ended with Penda's death. His two sons Wulfhere and Æthelred continued to expand Mercian *imperium* into southern territories. Wulfhere attacked Ashdowne in 661, which was still under West Saxon control.[429] We know that Cenwealh had given a significant area, or 3,000 hides, near Ashdowne in 648, the year of his return to Wessex, to his nephew Cuthred.[430] It is assumed Cuthred, or a relative, still retained control of this area during Wulfhere's attack and annexation. Additionally, Wulfhere also subsequently took the Isle of Wight, another possible West Saxon territory, giving both areas to Æthelwealh, as discussed above.[431] Mercian aggression was not isolated to Cenwealh's reign. Wulfhere attacked King Æscwine of Wessex (r. 674–676), Queen Seaxburh's successor, in 675 at *Biedanheafde*, an unidentified location.[432] Evidence is sparse, but with Mercia pushing ever further into the surrounding, smaller political units, these recorded instances are surely indicative of more skirmishes.

Mercian interference in Wessex, and for that matter Kent, changed for a period after Wulfhere's death in 675 upon Æthelred's ascension to the Mercian throne. During and until Wulfhere's death, Mercia had gained *imperium* in Sussex, Surrey, and possibly Essex at the expense of both Wessex and Kent. Essex and Surrey had likely been under Kentish *imperium* previously. But Kentish power in southeast England seems to have been lost after Æthelberht's death and succession of Eadbald in 616.[433] Kent remained a desirable ally for numerous reasons, such as trade and familial connections to Francia, and thus they retained influential

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[427] Bede, *HE* ii.20 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 203).
[428] Bede, *HE* iii.7 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 237).
[429] *ASC* A 661 (ed. Bately, 30).
[430] *ASC* A 648 (ed. Bately, 29).
[431] The *ASC* A 530 (ed. Bately, 21) claims Cerdic and Cynric captured the Isle of Wight. Bede also claims both the Isle of Wight and the *Meonware*, at the time of Wulfhere's gift to Æthelwealh, were West Saxon territories: Bede, *HE* iv.13 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 372–3). For a more sceptical view of West Saxon possession, see: Barbara Yorke, "The Jutes of Hampshire and Wight and the origins of Wessex," *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 84–96.
[432] See: *ASC* A 675 (ed. Bately, 31). Seaxburh was Cenwealh's wife and successor for one year according to *ASC* A 672 (ed. Bately, 31). Debate surrounds whether she was ruling in her own right or as queen-regent. Both are valid possibilities; however, I believe she ruled in her own right. For most recent discussion on this, see: Wragg, *Early English Queens*, 231–34.
[433] Bede, *HE* ii.5 and 6 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 151 and 155–57); *ASC* A 616 (ed. Bately, 27). For more on Eadbald, see: D.P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London: Routledge, 1992), 30–35.

status, albeit not as a military power.[434] It is unknown whether Mercian *imperium* extended to Kent during Wulfhere's reign, but kinship connections were there nonetheless because of Merewalh and Wulfhere's marriages to Kentish elite women. I discuss both marriages in depth in chapter three, but it is worth noting here, that the end of both marriages, following Merewalh's divorce from his wife and Wulfhere's death may have strained Mercian and Kentish relations. This might clarify Æthelred's attack on Kent in 676 whose cause remains unexplained.[435]

The Mercian royal family's control, or lack thereof, of the southeast corner of England is important to discuss because it has implications for the extent of the networks of women and matrilineal lines discussed throughout this thesis. The control over this area, gained during Wulfhere's reign and continued in the beginning of Æthelred's, was lost to Wessex for a brief period. The rise of Cædwalla of Wessex (r. 685–688) and his brother Mul saw repeated attacks on Kent and the territories held by Mercia.[436] The year after Cædwalla seized control of Wessex, both he and his brother Mul ravaged the Isle of Wight and Kent.[437] We are informed that Æthelwealh was slain during this initial attack on the Isle of Wight, but that two of his *duces* were able to retain control.[438] What this meant for Mercian *imperium* in Sussex is unclear. However, Mercian control was surely quashed when Cædwalla returned to the Isle of Wight and killed the two ruling *duces*. Bede also informs us that the Isle of Wight would remain in the control of Wessex during Ine's (r. 688–726) reign, long after Cædwalla abdicated in 688 to travel to Rome.[439] With this, Mercia had certainly lost control of the Isle of Wight and parts of Sussex for good after Cædwalla's second attack.

Mercian *imperium* in Kent, Surrey and Essex during Cædwalla's reign are more difficult to determine. Cædwalla's success in the Isle of Wight was replicated in Kent for only a span of two years. A year after gaining control of Kent, there was a reaction against Mul, who had remained in the kingdom possibly as a king or West Saxon subking.[440] He and twelve of his

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[434] Kent was also the location of the archbishopric. For a beginning see: Nicholas Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury* (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1984); Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450–751* (London: Longman, 1994), 176–80; Helena Hamerow, Andrew Shortland, and Esther Cameron, "Early Medieval Garnet-Inlaid Metalwork: A Comparative Analysis of Disc Brooches from Early Wessex," *The Antiquaries Journal* 101 (2021): 145; Irene Bavuso, "Balance of power across the Channel: reassessing Frankish hegemony in southern England (sixth-early seventh century)," *EME* 29, no. 3 (2021): 283–304.
[435] Bede, *HE* iv.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 368–9) and *ASC* A 676 (ed. Bately, 31).
[436] *ASC* A 685 (ed. Bately, 32).
[437] Bede claims that Cædwalla was an exile from Wessex during this campaign, so it is unclear whether he was ruling or not. *ASC* A 686 (ed. Bately, 32); Bede, *HE* iv.15 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 380–1).
[438] Bede, *HE* iv.15 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 380–1).
[439] Bede, *HE* iv.15 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 380–1); *ASC* B 726 (ed. Taylor, 24). Bede devotes a whole chapter to Cædwalla's journey and details the inscription found on his tomb: Bede, *HE* v.7 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 469–473). For more on this trend of kingly abdication in early England, see: Clare Stancliffe, "Kings who Opted Out," in *Ideal and Reality*, ed. Wormald, 154–76.
[440] Mul confirms a previous charter (S 10) at Minster-in-Thanet as king of Kent. See: Kelly, *St. Augustine's Abbey*, 139–46, particularly 144.

men were burned alive and afterwards, in reaction, Cædwalla returned and ravaged Kent for a second time.[441] This two-year period in Kent and the evidence for West Saxon *imperium* over Kent and the surrounding kingdoms is confused. We are mostly relegated to a series of patchwork charters which show that West Saxon *imperium* in Kent and the surrounding area was transitory.[442] Charter, S 233, used to indicate Cædwalla's *imperium* in Kent and Essex, is a composite document that is rather problematic.[443] It appears to be comprised of several different documents, with Cædwalla granting land at Hoo in Kent which is subsequently confirmed by four different kings: Sigehere of Essex, Swæfheard and Wihtred of Kent, and Æthelred of Mercia. While it does appear to have genuine information which is utalised in its fabrication, it cannot support the supposition of an East and West Saxon alliance because of Sigehere's links to the Mercian family, which I discuss in chapter three and alluded to above.[444] Furthermore, Æthelred can be viewed confirming charters in Kent the year after Cædwalla's abdication.[445] This indicates that Mercia quickly *regained imperium* over Kent shortly after a brief West Saxon interference.

The situation in Surrey, a Mercian subkingdom until Cædwalla's reign, shows signs of also being short-lived. Cædwalla appears in charter S 235 granting sixty hides at Farnham in Surrey with additional lands also located in Surrey. This charter is much more reliable than S 233 and is believed to be generally authentic.[446] Cædwalla was likely making a grant before his departure to Rome. What is unclear is whether Wessex retained control of Surrey after Cædwalla's abdication. His successor Ine has no extant charters showing grants of land in Surrey. This does not necessarily indicate that Wessex lost control of this territory as it could be that records just do not remain for Ine's reign in this area. Alternatively, it could indeed point to West Saxon's loss of control in the area. Without further evidence, a West Saxon *imperium* in Surrey beyond 688 cannot be confirmed. I believe, however, that like Kent, Wessex was unable to maintain interests in parts of Surrey and Æthelred eventually regained influence in this region.

I now move to the final kingdom of East Anglia which frequently had violent interactions with Mercia during Penda's initial expansion into Middle Anglia, which will become important for discussions in chapter four. The only near contemporary information which

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[441] *ASC* A 687 (ed. Bately, 32).
[442] For more on this series of charters, see Whitelock's comments: Dorothy Whitelock, "Succession Among Kentish Kings," in *The Framework of Anglo-Saxon History to A.D. 900*, ed. Kenneth Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976), 142–46.
[443] See: Scharer, *Königsurkunde*, 84–5 and Edwards, *West Saxon Charters*, 300–5.
[444] There is reference within S 233 that Kent had previously submitted to Sigehere of Essex and Yorke takes this as indication of an alliance between Mul and Sigehere. See: Yorke, "East Saxons," 29.
[445] S 12 and 10.
[446] Edwards, *West Saxon Charters*, 132–37.

survives for East Anglia's interactions with Mercia is the *HE*.[447] What we have is limited, but a few observations can be made.[448] First, it appears rulers of East Anglia remained free from the *imperium* of other kingdoms. Bede mentions that during Æthelberht's reign, Rœdwald still retained *ducatus*, or authority in his own kingdom.[449] This seems to have continued for the entirety of the seventh century despite Penda's repeated attacks. Second, it is possible that East Anglia had some level of influence. King Æthelwold (r. 654–663/4), the brother and successor to King Anna (d. 654), stood as sponsor during King Swithhelm of the East Saxons' baptism.[450] Because the attending bishop was Cedd, a Northumbrian ecclesiastic, it is a possibility that Æthelwold was in alliance with Oswiu as Cedd would remain as acting bishop over the East Saxon after Swithhelm's baptism.[451] Whether East Anglia and Northumbria held some sort of influence over Essex cannot be definitively determined. But Essex, as I explored above, eventually came under Mercian *imperium* with the succession of Sigehere and Sebbi. Despite possible Northumbrian influence around the mid-seventh century, East Anglia remained one of four kingdoms to survive into the ninth century.[452]

Early Mercian expansion into East Anglian territories can be viewed by the frequency of violent battles highlighted at the end of Penda's reign. Later, I will also discuss how this can be viewed with regard to Mercian elite women's religious foundations. Bede highlights three East Anglian kings that fell to Penda in battle. Two kings, Sigeberht and Ecgric fell in the same battle and Anna in a later one.[453] The battle in which Sigeberht and Ecgric were slain cannot be reliably dated. Sigeberht was a son of Rœdwald and brother to the former King Eorpwold, who had been living in exile in Gaul while his brother Eorpwold reigned. He did not return to East Anglia until three years after his brother's death.[454] After returning and succeeding to the East Anglian throne in 630/1, Sigeberht ruled for a time but then abdicated to join a monastery, which left his possible co-ruler Ecgric sole king of East Anglia.[455] Sigeberht was drawn from the monastery by a crowd of fearful East Anglians when Penda

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[447] Twelfth-century authors are used to fill gaps for the seventh century, but this can be problematic. Please see: Frank Stenton, "The East Anglian Kings of the Seventh Century," in *Preparatory*, ed. Stenton, 394–5; Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 58–9.
[448] There are several studies devoted to East Anglia. Please see: Stenton, "East Anglian Kings," in *Preparatory*; Dorothy Whitelock, "The pre-Viking age church in East Anglia," *ASE* 1 (1972): 1–22; Tim Pestell, *Landscapes of Monastic Foundation: The Establishment of Religious Houses in East Anglia c.650–1200* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004); Joseph Grossi, *Angles on a Kingdom: East Anglian Identities from Bede to Ælfric* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021).
[449] Bede, *HE* ii.5 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 148–9).
[450] For more on Swithhelm, see: Yorke, "East Saxons," 18–9.
[451] Ibid., 32. Bede, *HE* iii.23 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 286–7).
[452] The others being Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex. Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 58.
[453] Bede, *HE* iii.18 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 268–9).
[454] Bede, *HE* ii.15 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 190–1). It may not have been Eorpwold that Sigeberht had fled from, but instead, his father Rœdwald. This is alluded to in: Bede, *HE* iii.18 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 266–7).
[455] Bede, *HE* iii.18 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 268–9).

attacked the kingdom, and unfortunately, both he and Ecgric along with their army were killed. Upon their deaths, King Anna succeeded to the throne. If Cenwealh of Wessex was able to flee to the court of Anna in 645 after being ousted by Penda, this may indicate that the battle in which Sigeberht and Ecgric died took place sometime before this.[456] Possibly around 640 because Bede claims that Sigeberht ruled for a time before entering the monastery and had been living there for a considerable time when Penda attacked. The *ASC* dates Anna's death to c. 654.[457] Both these events are the only evidence for Mercian interaction with East Anglia.

A question arises due to the frequency of Penda's attacks on East Anglia: what were Penda's motives? It is possible that he had begun expansionary aggression earlier. The death of Anna c. 654 occurred approximately a year after Peada succeeded to the Middle Angles.[458] It is possible that Penda had created the Middle Anglian kingdom from smaller political units after wresting control from East Anglia. The battle against Anna may have been an attempt to expand further. This could be indicated by the case of the Gywre, a documented smaller polity located in the area between Mercia and East Anglia. It seems that East Anglia had previously had *imperium* or influence in this small territory. King Anna's daughter, Æthelthryth, had married a noble named Tondberht who was described as being an *ealdorman* of the South Gywre.[459] Additionally, the *Tribal Hidage* lists a North and South Gywre as one of the many smaller units that likely comprised the Middle Angles. Because Æthelthryth would later establish the monastery at Ely on lands given to her by Tondberht, the territory of the South Gywre was assuredly in this same area.[460] However, Peterborough Abbey, which is located thirty miles northwest of Ely, was a monastic foundation established by the Mercian royal family and is also considered to be in Gywre territory.[461] Whether Peterborough Abbey was in North or South Gywre is unknown. I discuss the founding of Peterborough Abbey in more detail in chapter four. However, it seems there were early shifts in control between Mercia and East Anglia, with Mercia solidifying control of this border region during Wulfhere's reign.

The battle of *Winwæd*, in which Penda was slain, is our last ephemeral reference for Mercian and East Anglian relations. Bede informs us that King Æthelhere of the East Angles was not only the cause of the battle, but he was also slain during the skirmish.[462] How he was

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[456] *ASC* A 645 (ed. Bately, 29).
[457] *ASC* A 654 (ed. Bately, 29).
[458] This is the view of Cyril Hart who places all of the smaller, minor polities within Middle Anglian jurisdiction. Please see: Hart, "Tribal Hidage," 137.
[459] Bede, *HE* iv.19 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 390–1).
[460] *LE* i.15 (ed. Blake, 32).
[461] Bede, *HE* iv.6 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 354–5).
[462] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 290–1).

the cause of this battle is anyone's guess. However, Æthelhere is described as king of the East Angles and brother to King Anna. With Penda killing Anna only a year earlier and Anna's brother allying with his slayer, this could indicate that Æthelhere may have played some role in Anna's final battle. Could Æthelhere have sided with Penda to gain the East Anglian throne? It is possible. But without further evidence, this must remain speculative.

2.5 – Conclusion

The picture I have drawn in the above chapter is context and background for the remainder of this thesis. Many of the topics discussed above necessarily concerned Mercian elite men and seventh-century events in which they featured. Throughout this discussion I have highlighted and alluded to instances of elite women's involvement in these events. In the following chapters, I reinsert Mercian elite women more fully into this political context. These women acted as the other half to the Mercian political men examined in this chapter. Therefore, the Mercian style of rulership, the men who would become king, the kingdoms Mercia subsumed into their hegemony, and lastly, political events and battles, combined to affect the lives of these women. While traditional views of *imperium* and ideas of the *bretwaldas* are the idealistic constructs of modern scholars, there were still kings who held *imperium*, although not as extensively as once imagined. This was not the all-encompassing *imperium* derived from Bede's *HE* but rather the large territories of powerful kingdoms that included and had subsumed many smaller territories and groups of people. This thesis recognises this aspect of pre-Conquest rulership. Thus, several powerful kings could hold vast territories of *imperium* at any given time, and this thesis assumes that the elite women discussed throughout were crucial for the smooth running of the Mercian hegemony as described in this chapter.

The Mercian kingdom with its core lands centred around the Trent River valley, began to expand outwards from this core during Penda's reign. This process of expansion began after Penda's revolt against King Edwin and Northumbrian *imperium*. After *Hæthfelth*, Penda became the dominating force in the Midlands and beyond. The Mercian process of expansion was not consistent nor steady. It suffered from the vicissitudes of the seventh century, which included the rise and fall of many powerful men. However, the Mercian method of rulership seems to have mitigated these circumstances. Unlike the methods displayed by other kingdoms, which subsumed and replaced smaller political units and their leadership, Mercia would either create new kingdoms out of multiple territories ruled by a member of the Mercian royal family — a method especially visible under Penda's rule. Or, the ruler of Mercia kept territories fully intact that would be governed by either trusted local leaders or other family

members. Because of this structure, Mercia could have several royal men acting as kings at any given time, with one acting as overlord. This can be illustrated with Peada's placement on the throne of the Middle Angles, or Merewalh on the throne of the Magonsæte. If a male family member was not available to rule or act as an administrative agent in these areas, it appears that a familial bond would be created through marriage to a Mercian woman. These unions are explored in the next chapter.

Chapter Three –
Beyond the Freoðuwebbe: Examining the Political Strategies Behind Mercia's Affinal Networks

As we saw in the previous chapter, the seventh-century Mercian royal family preferred to appoint family members as subkings and/or administrative agents in the political units where they claimed *imperium*. I found this practice was much more frequent and extensive than previously thought by examining each area of the extended Mercian kingdom: possibly a feature of seventh-century Mercian rulership. Some of the familial connections in Mercian subkingdoms had direct relation to the main branch of the Mercian royal family such as Eowa, Penda's brother, and Penda's sons, Merewalh and Peada. This practice of appointing family as agents in the extended *imperium* was likely to mitigate the mutable political circumstances which often led to forfeiture and/or attainment of territories.

I alluded to the fact in the preceding chapter that Mercian elite women had a direct role in this familial strategy and hinted at some of the affinal networks — those created by marriage. In this chapter, I begin restoring Mercian elite women back into this picture by analysing marriages between Mercian elite men and women and their partners who originate from the kingdoms of Bernicia, Deira, Kent and Essex. These unions will demonstrate that elite Mercian marriage was not solely used for alliance-building, but also part of broader seventh-century political strategy.

To begin this process, I will examine modern assumptions concerning the role of women in facilitating 'marriage alliances', which are often discussed within the context of the pre-Conquest *freoðowebbe*, or peaceweaver. While medieval elite marriage was certainly contracted for the purpose of alliance, much previous scholarship, by simply labelling an elite marriage as 'alliance' and without fully contextualising each individual marriage, flattens the many variables underlying each union. The first part of this chapter argues that uncritically labelling elite marriages as 'alliance' diminishes the complexity of the individual circumstances surrounding these marriages with an oversimplified explanation. By examining marriage through a nuanced, poststructural lens, women can once more become vital and active members of the Mercian royal family and to structures of rulership: the premise of this thesis.[463] After briefly discussing some historiographic considerations which form the foundation of this chapter; the following sections will individually examine the marriages of the Mercian

[463] In the context of this chapter, poststructural acts as a descriptive term for my analysis of Mercian unions on their own individual terms without relying too heavily on the observed social structures produced by scholarship — or a structural examination using 'models' — surrounding modern assumptions concerning early medieval marriage. I use this term as a way to simplify my process without becoming unnecessarily verbose.

elite family beginning with the unions to the Northumbrian kingdoms and then moving onto unions formed with southern kingdoms.

3.1 – Historiographic Considerations for Marriage Alliance and the Freoðuwebbe

The royal families of seventh-century England were highly interconnected through marriages and non-marital unions, which created webs of kinship throughout the insular world, including the Brittonic kingdoms, Ireland and as far south as northern Francia.[464] The elite women of early England acted as physical bonds, both symbolic and biological, between kingdoms through their marriages to other royal families. This has long been observed and acknowledged in much of scholarship. Accordingly, medieval elite affinal bonds are frequently portrayed as underlying marriage alliances as these bonds were created for political purposes; becoming an extremely beneficial tool in tracing political connections between kingdoms or families. This method of tracing marital bonds and labelling elite unions as political alliance building is so ubiquitous that to highlight the studies in which this can be seen would require that I build a bibliographic index. It seems to me that the scholarly study of elite marriages in the sources has focused on marriage alliance in the political sense to the exclusion of other aspects. Because of this, I suggest that it will be worthwhile to look more closely at the whole range of particular factors that went into an elite marriage. I am not suggesting we abandon the concept of marriage alliance, because I readily admit it has been beneficial in excavating political histories. Rather, I call for an examination which does not assume alliance. Instead, I suggest a study which contextualises each marriage individually to possibly observe heretofore unseen political motivations or actions. However, I first need to sketch the dominant trends in the scholarly treatment of elite marriage.

Because of the inherent nature of tracing elite marriages as a means to uncover political histories in much of scholarship, here I will focus on only a few examples for the purpose of illustration. Looking specifically at examples in pre-Conquest England, I have identified three unique instances of the treatment of elite marriage which can be extrapolated into separate subcategories of affinal alliance. The first subcategory of alliance emphasises how an elite marriage functioned as a way of solidifying a militaristic alliance between two

[464] The mother of King Aldfrith of Northumbria (r.685–704/5) was an Irish princess named Fina. Furthermore, I suspect there were marriages between Northumbria and the Dál Riada and possibly Rheged. This is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis. For more on Aldfrith's Irish connections, see: Colin Ireland, "Aldfrith of Northumbria and the Irish Genealogies," *Celtica* 22 (1991): 64–78.

families for the purpose of claiming advantage over a mutual rival.[465] The second reading of alliance suggests that we can uncover the occurrence of overlordship where, usually, a daughter is married to the king of a weaker polity. As an example, one such case is Ian Wood's examination of King Æthelberht of Kent's marriage to Queen Bertha, a Frankish princess. His theory is based on the perceived imbalance of power between the two kingdoms, with the more powerful kingdom, in this case a Frankish kingdom — forcing marriage upon a subservient, smaller kingdom, or Kent.[466]

Lastly, the third subcategory of marriage alliance is the instance most associated with peaceweaving. This was said to have occurred when unions were made to mend turbulent relationships between rival families — which are typically made visible when they eventually failed.[467] The peaceweaving bride is especially prevalent in literary examinations of early English queens, and I will discuss some of this scholarship shortly. However, it is telling as to how entrenched the concept of the peaceweaver is as a category of marriage alliance when Mary Blanchard makes special note concerning two elite families. She states that while, "these two major rivalries helped to shape tenth- and eleventh-century politics there are no marriages recorded between either the families…".[468] The assumption in this case was that because the families were rivals, there should have been peaceweaving marriages. Just by illuminating these three diverse subcategories, it shows that the concept of marriage alliance itself can be compressed into a single term which flattens what it is trying to highlight.

As stated above, I am not disputing that early medieval unions were for alliance-building among elite families. But beyond the three instances I outline above, lies multiple motivations behind each marriage. Additionally, if we correctly understand the medieval socio-cultural rules surrounding marriage alliances, then medieval contemporaries did too, and may have used affinal alliance subversively. The ready labelling of elite unions as 'alliance' in scholarship to describe and contextualise marriage has overwritten these alternative

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[465] Although ubiquitous, for a small sample of scholarship which traces political alliances through marriage for advantage, see: Nicholas J. Higham, *Ecgfrith: King of the Northumbrians, High-King of Britain* (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2015), 150–56 and *An English empire*, 81; Sheila Sharp, "The West Saxon Tradition of Dynastic Marriage: With special reference to the family of Edward the Elder," in *Edwin the Elder 899–924*, ed. N.J. Higham and D.H. Hill (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), 79–88. For a famous case of marriage between Francia and Wessex for an advantage over the invading Vikings, see: Michael J. Enright, "Charles the Bald and Aethelwulf of Wessex: the alliance of 856 and strategies of royal succession," *JMH 5*, no. 4 (1979): 291–302. For an alternate view of the alliance between Charles the Bald and Æthelwulf, see: Joanna Story, *Carolingian Connections: Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia, c. 750–870* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 240–43.

[466] I discussed overlordship in chapter two. For scholarship which views overlordship through marriage, see: Ian Wood, "Frankish Hegemony in England," in *The Age of Sutton Hoo: The seventh century in North-Western Europe*, ed. M.O.H Carver (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1992), 235–42 and *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450–751* (London: Longman Group, 1994), 176–80. For an opposing view, see: Bavuso, "Balance of power," 1–22.

[467] For example: Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers*, 44–5; Wragg, *Early English Queens*, 164–207.

[468] Mary Elizabeth Blanchard, "A new perspective on family strategy in tenth- and eleventh-century England: ealdorman status and the Church," *Historical Research* 92, no. 256 (2019): 246.

motivations, leading these marriages to be seen as primarily utilitarian: a marriage for the purpose of ending conflict or creating obligation. The nuance of the particular circumstances which led to each marriage have been lost because alliance — often labeled as a peaceweaving alliance — has become the answer to the question, rather than a complex phenomenon requiring deeper interrogation. Not so much a theory, but rather an assumption.

Part of this issue might originate from the broad adoption of Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropological model of alliance which was first discussed and organised in his seminal work, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Lévi-Strauss envisioned marriage as a system that was always based on exchange which was, in itself, founded on the principle of reciprocity: the idea that gift-giving creates mutual obligations between the giver and receiver. In this system, women could act as the ultimate exchangeable "good" because of their potential fertility.[469] Reciprocity in this context was the basis for Lévi-Strauss's theory of kinship because exchange was central to understanding affinal connections. These marriage connections, in turn, were foundational in maintaining social order, building reciprocal relationships, and/or establishing power. Marshall Sahlins would further nuance this idea of exchange to include the establishment of social relationships and not just an exchange of physical "goods".[470]

There have since been critiques of alliance theory. One criticism is that women should not be viewed as a commodity since this reduces women to being an object for exchange which negates her personhood.[471] The biggest critique, however, comes from Rodney Needham. Once a proponent of Lévi-Strauss's alliance theory, Needham argues that there is an overemphasis on the structuralist view which claims that in an alliance system based on exchange there are static and universal rules that could be applied to all cultures. Needham calls for a more nuanced view of alliance which acknowledges and accounts for the complex realities of differing societies. He argued that there needed to be a system which allowed for these potential distinctions in affinal connections and argued for two different rule sets: prescriptive marriage and preferential marriage.[472] Prescriptive marriage, first envisioned and proposed by Lévi-Strauss, followed a pattern of set and concrete rules which governed how certain groups could marry. Alternatively, preferential marriage, as proposed by Needham, allows for more socio-cultural variation because the rules surrounding marriage for any particular group are not mandatory, but rather suggested ideals based on social

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[469] Lévi-Strauss, *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 478–97.
[470] Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Abingdon: Routledge Classics, 2017), particularly chapter five 168–258.
[471] Robert Deliège, *Lévi-Strauss Today: An Introduction to Structural Anthropology*, trans. Nora Scott (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2004), 70–1.
[472] Rodney Needham's critique of Lévi-Strauss's alliance theory was over the course of his long and distinguished career, but it began with his foundational work: *Structure and Sentiment: a test case in social anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

preferences. Needham's preferential marriage also allows for personal preference and choice in marriage.[473] It seems that pre-Conquest scholarship aligns more closely with Lévi-Strauss's vision of alliance theory because the three subcategories I outlined appear to treat women within a prescriptive framework: one in which they have been turned into an exchangeable "good".

Additionally, marriage for the purpose of mending relations between families is often associated and conflated with the OE term *freoðowebbe*, or the peaceweaving bride.[474] Scholarship on *freoðowebbe*, particularly literary criticism, presents royal women as tools for blending two families together and bringing peace. This unintentionally limits the role of women in these marriages to their idealised roles, with men seeming to be the sole active participants as the contractors of the marriage.

The origins of the peaceweaving bride can be found in nineteenth-century literary scholarship, which emerged from John Kemble´s 1837 translation of *Beowulf*, in which he was first to correctly translate *freoðowebbe* as 'weaver of peace'.[475] Scholars, such as Ludwig Ettmüller, following Kemble´s lead, specifically connected *freoðowebbe* with marriage because of the term's association with women marrying to settle disputes between political entities found in *Beowulf*.[476] Because of this, *freoðowebbe*'s popularity as a historical and literary concept for women and queens as peaceweaving brides grew. This early scholarship has ensured the enduring influence of this concept of the *freoðowebbe* as a female-coded peaceweaver for early medieval English queenship and current scholarship continues this trend.[477] Michael Enright, in his article *Lady With a Mead Cup*, expanded the definition of *freoðowebbe* to include a queen´s roles in the royal hall: as a gift-giver, drink server, and counselor to her lord and his *comitatus*.[478] According to Enright, an elite woman weaved peace

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[473] Needham establishes his theory of preferential marriage in: *Structure and Sentiment*, 8–12.
[474] For a recent examination of *freoðuwebbe*, see: Megan Cavell, "Formulaic Friþuwebban: Reexamining Peace-Weaving in the Light of the Old English Poetics," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 114, no. 3 (2015): 355–372; Wragg, *Early English Queens*, 164–213.
[475] John M. Kemble, *A Translation of the Anglo-Saxon Poem of Beowulf* (London: William Pickering, 1837), 79. For an excellent historiographical examination and discussion of the issues surrounding peaceweavers, see: Peter S. Baker, *Honour, exchange and violence in Beowulf* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013), 103–26; Megan Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies: The Poetics of Human Experience in Old English Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 280–95.
[476] Ludwig Ettmüller, *Beowulf. Heldengedicht des achten Jahrhunderts.* (Zürich: Meyer und Zeller, 1840), 144.
[477] For a small example: Lori Eshleman, "Weavers of Peace, Weavers of War," in *Peace and Negotiation: Strategies for Coexistence in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2000), 15–37; Máirín MacCarron, "Royal Marriage and Conversion in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 68, no.2 (2017): 652; Paul R. Hyams, *Rancor and Reconciliation in Medieval England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2018), 12–3; Stefany Wragg, "An "Authorized Fiction": Towards a Biography of Anonymous 756," *Royal Studies Journal* 8, no.2 (2021): 26–54 and *Early English Queens*, 164–213; Bérat and Hardie, "Introduction," in *Relations of Power*, 12; Hillner and MacCarron, "Female Networks and Exiled Bishops," 36.
[478] This article was later expanded to include discussion of the warband: Michael J. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 1–37.

not just through marriage between kingdoms, but also through her duties in the household. This association between *freoðowebbe* as an historical category for pre-Conquest marriage has continued. In *Early English Queens*, discussed in the introduction, Wragg used the *freoðowebbe* to analyse how early queens´ marriages could act as peaceweaving between kingdoms.[479] The role of elite women as a confirmation of alliance between two families is certainly witnessed in the sources. However, continued conflation of the peaceweaving concept with marriage fails to consider that *freoðowebbe* itself provides little evidence to support this stance.

The continual adoption of the term peaceweaver to both represent and describe an elite woman's marriage fails to reflect current debates concerning whether this term describes the woman herself or a practice.[480] Additionally, it is debated whether the term peaceweaver was intrinsically connected to marriage at all and whether the elite woman in question was a passive diplomatic participant. The term *freoðowebbe/a* occurs in only three OE literary texts: *Beowulf*, *Elene*, and *Widsith*. That a word of rare occurrence in OE poetry has defined modern conceptions of historical women calls into question the legitimacy of its modern definition.[481] Larry Sklute was first to show the term has both a masculine and feminine form in *freoðowebba* (m.) and *freoðowebbe* (f.), indicating that 'weaver of peace' was a role for both men and women.[482] The association of the term *freoðuwebba/e* to reflect a strictly female-coded role was a development of nineteenth-century scholarship, and thus, not reflective of the pre-Conquest past outside of literary constructions.[483] In *Honour, Exchange and Violence in Beowulf*, Peter Baker further supports Sklute's findings, illustrating that the modern understanding of the peaceweaver derives from Victorian ideas of womanhood and domesticity. Baker suggests that this conflation between marriage and peaceweaving was essentially Ettmüller's invention. Thus, the term should not be considered synonymous with marriage.[484] He further argues that the continued use of *freoðowebbe* as a concept for a woman's role results in 'simplistic readings' of literature, history, and women's relationship to violence and peacemaking.[485] More recently, Megan Cavell has echoed Baker, questioning the viability of basing historical

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[479] Wragg, *Early English Queens*, 164–213.
[480] This debate is particularly explicit in: Erin Sebo and Cassandra Schilling, "Modthryth and the Problem of Peace-Weavers: Women and Political Power in Early Medieval England," *English Studies* 102, no. 6 (2021): 637–50.
[481] Baker, *Honour in Beowulf*, 104–7; Cavell, "Formulaic Friþuwebban," note 2 and 355–6 and *Weaving Words*, 281–82.
[482] See: Larry Sklute, "'Freoduwebbe' in Old English Poetry", in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Damico and Hennessey-Olsen (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990): 204–10; Megan Cavell, "Formulaic Friþuwebban: Reexaming Peace-Weaving in the Light of Old English Poetics", *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 114, no. 3 (2015): 355–372; Joseph Bosworth and T. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), 336.
[483] Sklute, "'Freoduwebbe'"; Megan Cavell, "Formulaic Friþuwebban" and *Weaving Words*, 280–86.
[484] Baker, *Honour in Beowulf*, 109.
[485] Baker, *Honour in Beowulf*, 125.

thought on *freoðowebbe*, a term only attested in OE literature.[486] Cavell, together with Sklute, argue that the term peaceweaving should refer to the practice of fostering peace through diplomatic marriage instead of the woman herself. This is the definition I will use in this chapter to describe a certain type of marriage alliance — one to mend relations.

While recognising the immense benefit of using the structural alliance theory for examination, this thesis elects to take a more poststructural view of elite marriages and attempts to look beyond the concept of peaceweaving. Although elite marriages certainly filled the political needs of a kingdom as an alliance building tool — which is certainly visible in this chapter — limiting the role of women in early medieval marriages to that of an ultimate "gift" between families or a peaceweaving bride, hinders our perceptions of the political events during which these marriages occurred. By analysing early pre-Conquest unions through only one of three subcategories (overlordship, peaceweaving, or alliance for mutual benefit) we may lose underlying patterns or political strategies mobilised by certain kingdoms, not to mention overlooking the role women may have played in contracting these unions.

3.2 – Marital and Non-Marital Unions Between Mercia and the Northumbrian Kingdoms

This section begins my examination of Mercian unions for the purpose of exploring the various underlying patterns and strategies that might be inferred from marriages taking place between Mercia and the Northumbrian kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia. By examining each union individually, I hope to illuminate potential political actions which mobilised not only certain marriages, but also the networks of women that marriage created. In other words, we can begin to highlight diverse or particular intentions underlying elite marriages, or identify recurring common features. To untangle the web, I will chronologically list each union beginning with those that occurred before Penda's reign, which I term pre-Pendan. I end the section with the marriages of Penda's children. The evidence for pre-Pendan unions is minimal, but marriages for Penda's children are better documented. Therefore, much of the section will focus on the last half of the seventh century.

[486] Cavell, "Formulaic Friþuwebban," and *Weaving Words*, 283–86.

3.3.1 – Earliest Known Pre-Pendan Union: Edwin and Cwenburh

I begin this discussion with King Edwin of Deira's union with Cwenburh of Mercia. Not only is their union the earliest for which we have evidence, but a close analysis of King Edwin's early years reveals alternative reasons for a union than that of a simple marriage alliance. In fact, Edwin and Cwenburh were likely not married in the Christian sense. I term this possibility a non-marital union, and instead of using marriage in this section I use union to describe Edwin and Cwenburh's relationship. There are several indicators which have pointed me to this conclusion, and this discussion will detail these indicators.

I begin with the language Bede uses to describe Edwin's relationship with Cwenburh. Within the context of Paulinus's first conversion of the Northumbrian court in 627, Bede informs us that Edwin had two sons, Osfrith and Eadfrith, *qui ambo ei exuli nati sunt de Quoenburga filia Cearli regis Merciorum*.[487] Cwenburh, in this statement, only remains as an ephemeral fragment alongside her Mercian father, King Cearl, who I discussed in the previous chapter.[488] Furthermore, both Cearl and Cwenburh only appear in the *HE* which has led to scholarly frustration. Why Bede describes who Osfrith and Eadfrith's mother was could be attributed to a need for maternal clarification, or possibly something deeper. Bede juxtaposes Queen Æthelburh's children by Edwin directly under his statement about Cwenburh, contrasting the two women by labelling Æthelburh *regina* while Cwenburh receives no title. It is clear Cwenburh is a Mercian elite woman because Bede choses to include Cearl and titles him *rex Merciorum*. I have illustrated Edwin's children with his two known partners in image 3.1. Why would he not label Cwenburh as *regina* if she was of royal stock and married to Edwin? Furthermore, why mention her at all? Traditionally, scholarship has treated Edwin's relationship with Cwenburh as a marriage alliance. But based on Bede's deliberate titling, or lack thereof, for Cwenburh, this makes me question whether this is the correct assumption.

Before I dig deeper into the possibility of a non-martial union for Edwin and Cwenburh, and thus dispelling the assumption of a marriage alliance, it is crucial to explore Edwin's early years. This is not only because Edwin and Cwenburh's relationship occurred during his exile, but also because early details may inform us of surrounding factors. Edwin's

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[487] '…who in his exile were both born to Cwenburh, daughter of King Cearl of the Mercians.': Bede, *HE* ii.14 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 187). This was Paulinus's conversion of the Northumbrian court. Paulinus had travelled to Northumbria with Æthelburh, a princess of Kent and Æthelberht's daughter. For a small selection on the pre-Conquest conversion, see: Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1972); N.J. Higham, *The convert kings: power and religious affiliation in early Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997); Barbara Yorke, "The Adaptation of the Anglo-Saxon Royal Courts to Christianity," in *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300–1300*, ed. Martin Carver (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 243–57 and *The Conversion of Britain: Religion, Politics and Society in Britain, 600–800* (London: Routledge, 2014).

[488] For more on Cearl, see chapter two.

life prior to 617 is difficult to reconstruct. Sources primarily become more forthcoming only after he defeated Æthelfrith and regained his kingdom of Deira, and subsequently, Bernicia. However, snippets of information remain in the *HB*, *HE*, the *Royal Genealogies* and the *ASC* for the period prior to 617. Thus, an attempt to create a skeletal picture of Edwin's early years is possible. I begin slightly before Edwin with his father Ælle and rival Bernician kings so we can determine the circumstances into which he was born. This will highlight potential scenarios behind his relationship with Cwenburh.

To understand how Edwin could have been introduced to Cwenburh, it will be necessary to discuss the events which led to Edwin's exile. Beginning with Edwin's paternity, both the *Royal Genealogies* and *HB* list Edwin's father as Ælle, the king of Deira.[489] Bede's only reference to Ælle occurs in his description of Gregory the Great's intended malapropism.[490] Other sources are more forthcoming. The *ASC* A claims he ruled Deira from 560 to 588 and that after his death, Æthelric reigned for five years.[491] This is an odd claim because Ælle's only known contemporary by the name of Æthelric was the king of Bernicia. According to the *HB*, Æthelric ruled for four to five years, which aligns with the dating given in the *ASC*. However, the *HB* claims he solely ruled in Bernicia, not Deira nor a combined Northumbria.[492] The *ASC*'s claims could be due to simple confusion on the chronicler's part, but I am not certain this is the case.

It could be that Æthelric succeeded to Deira after Ælle's death. Several possibilities lead me to this suggestion. First, however, it could be the case that attributing Æthelric to both kingdoms was a mistake of the *ASC* complier. At the time of the *ASC*'s creation, during the late ninth century, Northumbria was a singular kingdom, but this was not the case for the late sixth century. The *HB* states that Soemil was first to split Northumbria into two kingdoms and he was five or six generations removed from Ælle according to the given genealogical reckoning.[493] Until the mid- to late-seventh century, Northumbria was still comprised of these two separate kingdoms, Deira and Bernicia.[494] The complier may have been confused by

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[489] *HB*, ch. 61 and 63 (ed. Morris, 37–8); Dumville, "Anglian collection". Edwin's father should not be confused with Ælle, king of the South Saxons and one of Bede's kings holding *imperium*. See: S.E. Kelly, "Ælle [Ælla] (fl. late 5th cent.), king of the South Saxons," *ODNB* (2004): https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/198. There is another Ælle that ruled Northumbria during the later eighth century: David Rollason, "Ælle [Ælla]," *ODNB* (2004): https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/200.

[490] This is the vignette where Gregory encounters two enslaved boys in Rome, saying:'*Bene' inquit 'Deiri, de ira eruti et ad misericordiam Christi uocati. Rex prouinciae illius quomodo appellatur?' Responsam est quod Aelle diceretur. At ille adludens ad nomen ait: 'Alleluia, laudem Dei Creatoris illius in partibus oportet cantari.'*. Bede, *HE* ii.1 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 134–5).

[491] *ASC* A 560 (ed. Bately, 23) and A 588 (ed. Bately, 25).

[492] *HB*, ch. 57, 61 and 63 (ed. Morris, 36–37).

[493] *HB*, ch. 61 (ed. Morris, 37).

[494] For a discussion on the locations of Bernicia and Deira, see: David Rollason, *Northumbria, 500–1100: Creation and Destruction of a Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 43–53.

Bede's use of Northumbria or Deira and Bernicia depending on the context.[495] They may have assumed that Æthelric succeeded to a combined Northumbria because no additional sources were available to prove otherwise, or because Æthelric was supposedly Æthelfrith's father, and Æthelfrith did rule over a combined Northumbria.[496]

Second, it is possible that there was no confusion on the compiler's part and that two different royal men by the name of Æthelric existed. This would not be the first time that an unknown member of a royal family ascended the throne. Furthermore, we are aware that many members of the royal families were surely never recorded or have been lost. Æthelric seems a popular pre-Conquest name with the PASE database cataloguing 130 different entries.[497] However, this is complicated by onomastics. The genealogies and my reconstruction of the elite families of early medieval England both show that, at this time, Deira did not have any royal family members with the 'Æthel-' naming element.[498] As far as we are aware, early instances of 'Æthel-' only occur in Bernician genealogies. Therefore, it is difficult to believe there were two men named Æthelric ruling Deira and Bernicia simultaneously.

It is possible that King Æthelric of Bernicia did succeed—likely through appropriation—to the Deiran throne. This is due to Edwin's age at the time of Ælle's death. At the battle of *Hæthfelth* (c. 633), Edwin was forty-eight when he was killed.[499] This gives us a birthdate of around 585.[500] With Ælle's death date 588, Edwin would have still been considered an infant at two to three years of age. We are aware that Ælle had two other children, a daughter named Acha and an unnamed child who was the parent of Hereric, Hild's father.[501] Ælle's children are shown in image 3.2. However, we are not certain of their ages at the time of Ælle's death.[502] They may have been older, or not. While it appears youth did not necessarily inhibit succession in early pre-Conquest England, it would have left the kingdom vulnerable if a child-ruler lacked strong support systems.[503] With no apparent successor, Æthelric may have taken the opportunity to expand Bernicia by annexing Deira. This explanation could reconcile the differences between the *ASC* and *HB*. Furthermore, it could

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[495] Bede's *HE* is generally acknowledged to be a source for earlier dates in the *ASC*.
[496] Dumville, "Anglian genealogies".
[497] "Æthelric," Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England, http://www.pase.ac.uk, accessed 21 December 2022.
[498] *HB*, ch. 61 (ed. Morris, 37); *ASC* A 560 (ed. Bately, 23); Dumville, "Anglian genealogies".
[499] For more on *Hæthfelth* see chapter two.
[500] Bede, *HE* ii.20 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 202–3).
[501] Bede, *HE* iii.6 and iv.23 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 230–1 and 406–7).
[502] Ælle is given a succession date of 560 by *ASC* A, but this is likely not accurate because he is also given a reign of thirty years in the same entry by *ASC* E. Because Northumbria was inconsistently one kingdom and this caused confusion in later chroniclers who only understood Northumbria as one political unit, he may have succeeded before this date. See: *ASC* A 560 (ed. Bately, 23); *ASC* E 560 (ed. Irvine, 20).
[503] A famous case of pre-Conquest child rulership is Osred. Aldfrith, king of Northumbria, died c.704 leaving his young eight-year-old son, Osred, to succeed to the Northumbrian throne. This may indicate precedent for a child-ruler. Bede, *HE* v.18 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 512–3).

account for the large gap between Ælle's death and Æthelfrith's supposed succession to Deira sometime around 604 based on the claims of the *HB*.[504]

If Æthelric was already ruling Deira, as I suspect, Æthelfrith may have succeeded to both Deira and Bernicia in 593, not just Bernicia as it has been assumed.[505] Such an outcome suggests that Edwin would have entered exile much earlier than previously thought. The assumption that Æthelfrith succeeded first to Bernicia and then Deira originates from the *HB*, which claims he ruled a total of twenty-four years, twelve in Bernicia and twelve in Deira.[506] This is not confirmed by any other source, and thus, the *HB*'s timeline has been generally accepted. Because of this, most attribute Æthelfrith's conquest of King Aedan of the Dalriada at the battle of *Degsastan* in 603 to his conquest of Deira. But, as Molly Miller has shown, the regnal years of the kings preceding Oswiu and Ecgfrith are sometimes not accurate and are rather dates calculated by the writers of our sources.[507] Additionally, the numbers seem artificial due to the even division of years, and conflicts with the *ASC* E which claims Æthelfrith succeeded to Northumbria in 593. If Æthelric, began ruling both kingdoms c. 588, he may have placed Æthelfrith in Bernicia as a subking if old enough. This is a pattern witnessed later in the mid-seventh century during Oswiu's reign. Furthermore, as I described in chapter two, this was also how the Mercian hegemony was controlled. If I am correct, this would once more reconcile the *ASC* and *HB*. After his father's death in 593, Æthelfrith would have had a twenty-four-year reign but he would have succeeded to a combined Northumbria, not only Bernicia.

This is further strengthened by my proposal that Edwin's sister Acha was likely Æthelfrith's first wife. This is against most scholars who place her as Æthelfrith's second wife with the union occurring sometime around 604.[508] I do agree that Æthelfrith and Acha's marriage/union was to unify the two families, thus ensuring a smooth transition of power and bolstering Æthelfrith's claims to the Deiran throne. However, because as I have suggested, he succeeded to both kingdoms sometime around 593, their marriage likely took place much earlier than c. 604. It is, therefore, likely that the date of Edwin's exile can be pushed to earlier than 604, the date usually attributed to Æthelfrith's seizure of Deira.

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[504] *HB*, ch. 63 (ed. Morris, 38).
[505] *ASC* E 593 (ed. Irvine, 22).
[506] *HB* ch. 63 (ed. Morris, 38). The *HE* only specifies that he had a reign of 24 years: Bede, *HE* i.34 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 116–7). Molly Miller has determined that the compilers of the *ASC* were 'too hasty' in their calculation of this date and that Bede, from whom they derived this date, meant for the first regnal year to be marked beginning in 592/3: Molly Miller, 'The dates of Deira,' *ASE* 8 (1979): 52.
[507] Miller, 'Dates,' 61.
[508] This thought may be derived from Colgrave and Mynors note which claims the *HB* labels Bebbe as Æthelfrith's second wife. However, the *HB* does not make this claim. Bede, *HE* (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 231 n. 3.

With Edwin's exile found to be much earlier than previously thought, this brings me back to the events which took place during Edwin's exile and when he had a relationship with the Mercian princess Cwenburh. It is scholarly assumption that Edwin remained in Deira until 604, but Bede never dates Edwin's exile, nor does any other source. He only states Edwin was in exile and that his predecessor, Æthelfrith, persecuted him.[509] Additionally, early sources do not detail Edwin's exact locations except the two given by Bede: Mercia and East Anglia.[510] If my proposed timeline for Æthelfrith's reign is correct, Edwin would have been forced into exile at around three or four years of age. This may account for the shadowy past of his childhood. It is likely his caretaker, possibly his mother, fled to an allied kingdom. Other examples in early pre-Conquest England indicate it may have been a kingdom with ties of kinship.[511]

Two post-Conquest sources may contain answers for Edwin's whereabouts during the beginning of his exile, and this might answer how he came into contact with King Cearl, Cwenburh's father. These are Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (c. 1136) and *Trioedd ynys Prydein* (*TYP*) found in the fourteenth-century White Book of Rhydderch.[512] Both sources place Edwin at the court of Cadfan of Gwynedd, the father of Cadwallon, Penda's ally during *Hæthfelth*.[513] Few would consider Geoffrey of Monmouth a credible source, including myself. We have little knowledge of his sources and Geoffrey's story suffers from unrealistic and fantastical embellishments.[514] He claims Edwin's pregnant mother fled to Gwynedd after Ælle's death and gave birth to Edwin while she was there. However, this does not align with any timeline given by contemporary sources. Additionally, he claims Æthelfrith was Edwin's father. Although Geoffrey of Monmouth's claims are hard to accept, the *TYP* gives me pause.

Despite originating from a late Welsh manuscript, the *TYP* holds more promise. A second version of triad 26, found in the Red Book Llyfr Coch Hergest, claims Edwin was:

> *Ac a uu vn o Deir Prif Ormes Mon a uagwyt yndi. A'r eil oed Daronwy. A'r dryded, Edwin vrenhin Lloegyr*.[515]

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[509] 'When he was being persecuted by his predecessor Æthelfrith, he wandered secretly as a fugitive for many years through many places and kingdoms, until at last he came to Rædwald and asked him for protection against the plots of his powerful persecutor': Bede, *HE* ii.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 176–7).
[510] Ibid.
[511] Æthelburh fled to her natal kingdom of Kent after Edwin was slain in battle c.633: Bede, *HE* ii.20 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 204–5). I later argue that Æthelfrith's children fled to his second wife, Beba's natal kingdom of Dál Riada or somewhere in Ireland. A study of women's care of children during political upheaval has yet to be conducted and is beyond the scope of this dissertation.
[512] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae* xi.190, ed. and trans. Michael Reeve and Neil Wright (Boydell & Brewer, 2007) and *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*: the triads of the island of Britain, ed. Rachel Bromwich, 4th ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014).
[513] See chapter two.
[514] Dumville, "Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend," *History* 62, no. 205 (1977): 175.
[515] '… and that was Palug's Cat, and it was one of the Three Great Oppressions of Môn, nurtured therein. The second was Daronwy, and the third was Edwin, king of Lloegr.': *TYP*, 26 WR, ed. Bromwich, 52.

Despite being introduced by a monstrous cat, one of the next two of 'three great oppressions of Môn [Anglesey]' include Edwin, king of Lloegr.[516] The distinction of Lloegr, is further used to describe Æthelfrith who appears in Triad 10 as one of the chieftains of Deira and Bernicia.[517] This term appears again when discussing *Hæthfelth* and Cadwallon's slaying of Edwin and his forces of Lloegr.[518] Therefore, it can be assumed that Lloegr is indicating a combined Northumbria. That Edwin was nurtured in Anglesey indicates he spent some amount of time in the kingdom of Gwynedd, which at this time claimed the isle of Anglesey. Chronologically, the compiler of the *TYP* could have possibly followed Monmouth's claim for Edwin's fosterage in Gwynedd. Rachel Bromwich, however, points out that triad 26 is found in a composite text that combines several older sources.[519] While the inability to date the *TYP*, and sources from which it is derived, has been used to argue against its use as an historical source, the triads could have followed earlier oral traditions, much like the later saints' *vita*e used in other parts of this thesis.[520] Thus, I am not so quick to dismiss the *TYP*'s claims. With my proposed timeline above for Edwin's exile, the claim that he spent time in Gwynedd, likely as a youth, becomes more of a reality. Furthermore, later events could also support that Edwin spent time in Gwynedd.

If the *TYP* is correct, Edwin's time in Gwynedd may have been the catalyst for his meeting King Cearl of the Mercians. As I explained in chapter two, Mercia during Penda's reign had strong ties to Welsh-Brittonic kingdoms, particularly with Gwynedd and Powys. It is not a stretch to push the establishment of these ties to before Penda rule during Cearl's reign. This is especially the case if a nascent Mercian expansion was taking place. It could be that Mercia had begun its push for extended *imperium* at the beginning of the seventh century. Even if this is not the case, having solid political relationships with Gwynedd and Powys was in the Mercian royal family's best interest. The Mercian kingdom was the immediate neighbour of Powys to the east. Therefore, Cearl, and likely his daughter Cwenburh, may have known Edwin through interactions between the royal families of Mercia and Gwynedd. He could have become interested in Cwenburh during one of these meetings.

Because Edwin met Cwenburh during his exile, this leads to several questions concerning the purpose of this union, especially because the classic models of peaceweaving and marriage alliance cannot fully explain their union. Firstly, why would Edwin form a union during his exile with the daughter of a potential Mercian *subregulus*. Second, while scholars

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[516] For more on Palug's cat, see: *TYP*, ed. Bromwich, 473–76.
[517] *TYP*, 10 W, ed. Bromwich, 18. For more on Æthelfrith in *TYP*, see: Craig Cessford, "The Death of Aethelfrith of Lloegr," *Northern History* 30, no. 1 (1994): 179–83.
[518] *TYP*, 69, ed. Bromwich, 192.
[519] *TYP*, ed. Bromwich, xcviii.
[520] For arguments against its use, see: Dumville, "Sub-Roman," 178.

assume that Edwin married Cwenburh, Bede never explicitly states this was the case. This is likely a case of non-marital union. Concerning my first question of why Edwin would form a union with Cwenburh, scholars ubiquitously assume that this was a marriage alliance. Here, I highlight two pieces of scholarship because they are indicative of general thought. Higham attributes their marriage to Cearl's quest to push his influence into territories north of Mercia.[521] However, Fiona Edmonds sees this union as part of Edwin's initial push for influence into the kingdoms south of the Humber.[522] Both scenarios are valid, however, they fail to consider that Edwin, as royal exile, held little power at this point. While this does not discount planning for the future on either Cearl or Edwin's part, the immediate situation did not lend itself to a marriage alliance. It could be that Edwin was trying to expand his support for regaining the Deiran throne. However, his stay in Gwynedd indicates he already had what seems to be a wealthy and influential kingdom in which he resided.[523] If his mother's natal kingdom was Gwynedd and/or he was fostered in Gwynedd, Edwin's ties of kinship, either biological or social, would have created an obligation of alliance.[524] Therefore, he already had powerful allies on which to rely.

However, we have no evidence of when Edwin's union with Cwenburh took place. Presumably it occurred after Edwin left Gwynedd. While there are no indications that Æthelfrith was searching for Edwin while he was still residing in Gwynedd, this might have changed c. 604 or shortly thereafter. In 604, Edwin was approaching 19–21 years of age when he would have become a stronger contender for Deira. If my suspicions are correct, Acha likely died — potentially during childbirth — around this same time. This may have left Æthelfrith with a shaky claim to Deira. We do not know if Æthelfrith's first son, Eanfrith, had solid claims to Deira and Oswald, the next in line, was still an infant. However, Edwin was now of age to succeed to his natal kingdom. Both factors could have pushed Æthelfrith to begin pruning the Deiran royal family. One of our earliest references for Æthelfrith may support this perspective. In 603, Æthelfrith began pushing west with the battle of *Degsastan* in the kingdom of Dal Riada.[525] This battle against Dal Riada took place far north of Edwin's location. However, the following year (c. 604/5), Æthelfrith focused his attention on the former Roman

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[521] N.J. Higham, "King Cearl, the Battle of Chester and the Origins of the Mercian 'Overkingship'," *Midland History* 17, no. 1 (1992): 4 and *English empire*, 78.
[522] Fiona Edmonds, *Gaelic Influence in the Northumbrian Kingdom: The Golden Age and the Vikings* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2019), 35.
[523] Gwynedd had early ties to Ireland and based on found pottery, there was long-distance trade in the Irish Sea during this period. See: Nancy Edwards, *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Ireland* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1990), 68–73; Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 152–157; Christopher Loveluck and Aidan O'Sullivan, "Travel, Transport and Communication to and from Ireland, c. 400–1100: an Archaeological Perspective," in *The Irish in Early Medieval Europe: Identity, Culture and Religion*, ed. Roy Flechner and Sven Meeder (London: Palgrave, 2016), 19–37.
[524] Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 293–99.
[525] Bede, *HE* i.34 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 116–7) and *ASC* E 603 (ed. Irvine, 22).

city of *Cærlegion* (Chester), which neighboured Gwynedd.[526] It is curious he made such a swift change in direction when many smaller Brittonic kingdoms were closer to the core of Northumbria — which can perhaps be explained if he had heard rumours of Edwin's whereabouts.

Edwin's move to Mercia and King Cearl's court was likely caused by Æthelfrith's concentration on finding the exiled prince. The battle at *Cærlegion* may be a sign that Æthelfrith had located Edwin, his rival to Deira, in Anglesey. Cearl's kingdom was Edwin's best option because he was likely known to part of the Mercian royal family. Whether Edwin had already pursued and/or was in a relationship with Cwenburh at this time is unknown. This brings me back to the question of whether Edwin was married to Cwenburh, as most assume. There are several indicators that this union was not marriage in the traditional sense. But before I detail these, it must be remembered that Edwin and Cwenburh were pre-Christian. Neither party, as far as we are aware, had converted to the Christian faith at the time of their union. The only evidence for conversion happened much later when Edwin converted in 627 after his marriage to Æthelburh, a Kentish princess.[527] Additionally, various forms of long-term union were available to couples even if the Church pushed for more formal ties of Christian marriage.[528]

This said, there are three indicators for a non-marital union which I would like to present for Edwin and Cwenburh. Firstly, Bede never states they were married, only that she was the mother of Edwin's two sons and the daughter of King Cearl.[529] This may be intentional on Bede's part. For Christian marriages, Bede uses terms like *uxor*, *coniunx*, or even an elite woman's royal title, *regina*.[530] However, it appears that Bede chose to refrain from these terms when speaking about possible alternative unions, or possibly non-Christian unions. An example of this is the passage where Cwenburh receives no title, while directly under this sentence Edwin's wife, Æthelburh, is titled *regina*.[531] A full examination of how Bede uses Latin terms to show difference between marital and non-marital unions still needs to be conducted.[532] However, this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

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[526] Bede, *HE* ii.2 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 140–1) and *ASC* E 605 (ed. Irvine, 22–3).
[527] Bede, *HE* ii.14 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 186–7).
[528] For a brief example, see: Ruth Mazo Karras, *Unmarriages: Women, Men, and Sexual Unions in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Barbara Yorke, *The Conversion of Britain, 600–800* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2006), 223–228.
[529] Bede, *HE* ii.14 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 186–7).
[530] For a few examples: Bede, *HE* i.25 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 72–3); *HE* ii.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 180–1); *HE* iii.7 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 232–33).
[531] Bede, *HE* ii.14 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 186–7). More examples can be found at: Bede, *HE* ii.3 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 143); ii.5 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 150–1).
[532] Studies of how Bede discusses marriage within the context of Christianisation have been conducted. For example, see: Máirín MacCarron, "Brides of Christ, royal marriage and the conversion of the English in Bede's Historia Ecclesiastica" (PhD diss., University College Cork, 2007) and "Royal Marriage and Conversion in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 68, no. 2 (2017): 650–70.

Our second indicator for an alternative union between Cwenburh and Edwin are other non-marital unions of pre-Conquest kings. It seems early pre-Conquest kings formed relationships outside of marriage during periods of exile. The best example of this is Oswiu's relationship with a royal woman of the Cenél nÉogain in Ireland. This relationship resulted in the birth of Aldfrith, later the king of Northumbria (r. 685–704/5). This woman was possibly named Fín(a), if we believe the second naming part in Aldfrith's Irish name (Flann Fína) is reflective of his Irish parentage.[533] Bede and the anonymous author of the *VSC* allude to Aldfrith's illegitimacy indicating that Oswiu's relationship with princess Fína was not a traditional Christian marriage.[534] Their relationship was a non-marital union. With Aldfrith's illegitimacy well-known but not considered a bar to rulership or royalty, any children Edwin had through a non-marital union would have still been considered for succession.

Lastly, a formal marriage may not have been preferred for either party. Edwin's status as an exile meant he likely did not have access to personal wealth or lands, but elite marriage required both for contracting a formal union due to expected dowry/dower obligations.[535] Lands and dower given to women upon their marriage have been the topic of several studies.[536] Edwin was still dependent on the kindness of whichever king and kingdom he resided. Cearl's approval for an informal match may have been motivated by the promise of Edwin later regaining his kingdom. If this came to fruition, then formal negotiations could be discussed between the two rulers. Furthermore, Edwin may have wanted the ability for an easier dissolution if a better opportunity arose. If Penda's aggressive reaction to his sister's repudiation by King Cenwealh is an indicator of the seriousness with which Mercia viewed formal marriage ties, Edwin would have wanted to avoid such a reaction.[537] Unfortunately, this is as far as I can take this currently because an exclusive study of the various early medieval alternative unions does not currently exist and is beyond the scope of this thesis.[538]

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[533] Aldfrith's obit in Irish annals use his Irish name. See: *The Annals of Tigernach* 704.4, ed. and trans. G. Mac Niocaill (https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100002A/) and entry 704 in, *The Annals of Inisfallen (MS Rawlinson B. 503)*, ed. and trans. Seán Mac Airt (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1951), 102–3. For a critical and cogent exploration of the Irish sources concerning Aldfrith, see: Colin Ireland, "Aldfrith of Northumbria and the Irish Genealogies," *Celtica* 22 (1991): 64–78. For more on the Irish annals, see: D.P. McCarthy, *The Irish Annals: Their Genesis, Evolution and History* (Dublin: 2010); N. Evans, *The Present and Past in Medieval Irish Chronicles* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010).

[534] Bede, *VSC* ch. 24 (ed. Colgrave, 236–37; Anon., *VSC* iii.6 (ed. Colgrave, 104–5).

[535] This can be witnessed in King Æthelberht of Kent's law codes (75–84). See: F.L. Attenborough, *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1922), 14–15. See: Philip Reynolds, "Dotal Charters in the Frankish Tradition", in *To Have and Hold: Marrying and its Documentation in Western Christendom, 400–1600*, ed. Philip Reynolds and John Witte (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 114–64.

[536] For a study specific to later pre-Conquest England, see: Samual Cardwell, "*Be wifmannes beweddunge*: Betrothals and Weddings in Anglo-Saxon England," *ASE* 49 (2020): 81–106.

[537] Bede, *HE* iii.7 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 232–35).

[538] Plenty of work has been done on medieval marriage. For brief example of scholarship on early medieval marriage, see: Ruth Mazo Karras, "The history of marriage and the myth of Friedelehe," *EME* 14, no. 2 (2006): 119–151; Philip Lyndon Reynolds, *The Christianization of Marriage During the Patristic and Early Medieval Periods* (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2001. There are far fewer studies on non-traditional, or pre-Christian unions, with much

Edwin's relationship with Cwenburh, whether through marriage or an alternative union, had been pivotal to his survival during his exile in the southern kingdoms. Creating a connection with Cwenburh would have connected Edwin to a potentially large royal family network with the resources to aid his quest to remain hidden from Æthelfrith, and potentially, in regaining the Deiran throne. However, we know that Edwin did not remain in Mercia, and to our knowledge, he never utilised his Mercian connections to regain the Deiran kingdom. Instead, we are told that he wandered in secret for many years and through many kingdoms until he went to East Anglia and the court of King Rædwald, one of Bede's *bretwalda*.[539]

As far as we are aware, Edwin did not remain with Cwenburh. By around 625, she was either deceased or dismissed when Edwin married his Christian bride, Æthelburh of Kent.[540] The marriage to Æthelburh would have not occurred had he been married or in a non-marital union because of the Kentish kingdom's adherence to Roman Christianity. However, this is the extent to which I can determine what happened to Cwenburh. It seems after Edwin regained his kingdom of Deira, he used his knowledge of Gwynedd and Mercia to subjugate those kingdoms until their rebellion at *Hæthfelth* in 633. Cwenburh is never mentioned beyond her sons' maternity, so she unfortunately must remain lost to time.

3.3.2 – The Unions Between Penda and Oswiu's Children

As the last section shows, examining marriages or unions within individual contexts can be fruitful for reassessing the politics of the seventh century. But Edwin and Cwenburh's relationship is only one example of the many references to the marriages of the Mercian royal family. This section will continue a close analysis of the elite marriages between the Mercian and Northumbrian royal families by focusing on the matches that occurred in the mid- to late seventh century. That is, the marriages between: Cyneburh and Alhfrith, Peada and Alhflæd, and lastly, Æthelred and Osthryth. These affinal connections are prominent due to their inclusion in the *HE*, and all three of these marriages transpired in the Christian sense: two before Penda's death in 655 and one which occurred sometime during the 670s. These marriages between the Mercian and Northumbrian royal families can be viewed in image 3.3.

All three unions have been classed as marriage alliances for the purpose of mending relations, although the surrounding events and context fail to fit the typical peaceweaving

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of the work not fully considering the early Middle Ages. For scholarship on early England, see: Margaret Clunies Ross, "Concubinage in Anglo-Saxon England," *Past & Present* 108, no. 1 (1985): 3–34.

[539] Bede states that Edwin: *…per diversa occultus loca vel regna multo annorum tempore profugus vagaretur*. After this he finally ends his journey at Rædwald's court, who is the fourth *Bretwalda* in Bede's list of powerful overkings. Bede, *HE* ii.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 174–83).

[540] Bede, *HE* ii.9 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 162–3).

model. This contrary pattern has usually been explained by looking to the failed peaceweaving found in the Finnsburg fragment of *Beowulf*.[541] But I will re-examine these three marriages through a poststructural lens to assess if there are other factors beyond mending relations. The first part of this section explores events during the first two marriages. These are the matches between Alhfrith and Cyneburh as well as Peada and Alhflæd. I argue that both marriages are connected to a Northumbrian strategy used to undermine growing Mercian influence. The last marriage between Æthelred and Osthryth is examined in isolation. Because this marriage occurred well after the first two, it cannot be connected to the Northumbrian suppressive strategy proposed in the first part of this section. I suggest that while Æthelred and Osthryth's marriage was an attempt to repair relations between Mercia and Northumbria, it was so Æthelred could focus on regaining and repairing Mercia's expansionary interests in southern Britain.

Northumbrian suppression strategy using marriage

The first two marriages between Penda and Oswiu's children occurred sometime between 650 and 655, during the years directly before Penda's death at the battle of *Winwæd*. The first was Alhfrith's marriage to Cyneburh. The second was Peada's marriage to Alhflæd. Although Bede describes both marriages within the same passage, scholarship tends to discuss these marriages separately.[542] Wragg, one of the only scholars to examine both together, considered these two marriages to be connected to and a sign of attempted, but failed peaceweaving between the kingdoms.[543] However, not only are these two marriages possibly part of a larger strategy, but a closer examination suggests that peaceweaving was used to enact a subversive strategy using the contemporary expectations of marriage. This section argues that King Oswiu of Bernicia (later, king of a combined Northumbria) used marriage alliances as a strategy for undermining the growing prominence of Mercia under Penda's rule.

I begin this discussion with the events in which we learn of these two marriages. After Peada received the Middle Anglian kingdom from his father Penda, he travelled to the

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[541] The Finnsburg fragment is in: *Beowulf* lines 1071–1159. I use *Klaeber's Beowulf*, ed. R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John Niles, 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). Scholarship on *Beowulf* is too extensive to list here. For more on Hildeburh and her role in the fragment, see: Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, "Gender Roles," in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1998), 315–17; Dockray-Miller, *Motherhood and Mothering*, chapter four, but particularly 96–100.
[542] Bede, *HE* iii.21 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 278–9). For example, see: N.J. Higham, *Ecgfrith: King of the Northumbrians, High-King of Britain* (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2015), 90 and 96.
[543] Wragg, *Early English Queens*, 172–82.

Bernician royal estate of *Ad Murum* (Walbottle) to seek Alhflæd's hand in marriage.[544] Oswiu informed Peada he would consider the marriage if Peada and his kingdom would accept Christianity. After some consideration, Peada agreed to convert not just to marry Alhflæd, but because he was persuaded of the spiritual benefits of Christianity, which was likely the motivation for Bede's inclusion of this event.[545] However, Bede also describes that he was converted through the earnest persuasion of Alhfrith, *cognatus et amicus eius* (his kinsman and friend). [546] While this may be a stock phrase in early Latin texts, Bede further confirmed a kinship connection (*cognatus*) by clarifying their relationship was affinal due to Alhfrith's previous marriage to Cyneburh, Peada's sister. Thus, despite Bede's intention to use this passage to elucidate the Christianising of kings, the passage illuminates an existing in-law relationship between Peada and Alhfrith through marriage. It also intimates that the two men were well acquainted.

There are questions which are raised due to the particular details of this passage, which suggest that these two marriages have underlying subversive motives. As I mentioned, most view these marriages as classic examples of failed peaceweaving. Relations between the kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria were usually tense, if not in all out conflict for most of the seventh century. If Cyneburh's marriage to Alhfrith was a tenuous peaceweaving between Mercia and Northumbria, how did these two men count themselves as friends? Even if animosity had somewhat cooled enough to allow the marriage of Cyneburh and Alhfrith to occur, it is hard to believe it was an atmosphere where friendship between Alhfrith and Peada could have flourished. Furthermore, while marriage certainly was used as a tool to form alliances, it is questionable that Penda would have married one of his daughters to a usually hostile family. A second question arises because this "friendship" appears to be the source of Peada's journey to Bernicia to ask specifically for Oswiu's permission to marry Alhflæd, Alhfrith's sister. Did Alhfrith intentionally point Peada in the direction of his sister? We need to explore both questions more fully to try and understand.

In this context concerning the relations between the Mercian and Northumbrian kingdoms around 650, bonds, whether through marriage or friendship, would have been superficial, and at best, well-intentioned but temporary. Between Edwin's death at *Hæthfelth*

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[544] I discuss this in chapter two.

[545] The conversionary role of elite women, in not only Bede but other contemporary writers, has long been recognised in scholarship. Arguments surround whether Bede diminished women's role during the conversion or not. For a small sample, see: Hollis, *Women and the Church*, 208–42; Janet Nelson, "Queens as Converters 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)*, ed. M.C. La Rocca (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2007), 95–107; Máirín MacCarron, "Royal Marriage and Conversion in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 68, no. 2 (2017): 650–70.

[546] Bede, *HE* iii.21 (ed. Cograve and Mynors, 278–9).

in 633 and Penda's death at *Winwæd* in 655, relations between Mercia and Northumbria were highly volatile.[547] During this time, Penda frequently made incursions into Bernicia and the Brittonic territories annexed by Northumbria.[548] Penda's attentions fluctuated, shifting focus from Northumbria to the southern kingdoms.[549] However, he never ended aggressions for long. Bede noted that in Penda's final Northumbrian military venture, he could not even be swayed to end his devastation heedless of Oswiu's offers of payment through royal treasure and gifts.[550] Penda was set on extermination. As Bede describes Penda's wrath: *qui totam eius gentem a parvo usque ad magnum delere atque exterminare decreverat*.[551] With this being the political climate during the years in which these marriages occurred, peaceweaving may have been the last item on Penda's mind.

Given this context, how do we define and explain Alhfrith and Peada's relationship — whether there was friendship or not — and the marriages to Cyneburh and Alhflæd? On one hand, Bede may have mobilised their homosocial connection in order to demonstrate an appropriate channel of conversion.[552] On the other, the mention of kinship and friendship signaled through the term co*gnatus* alludes to an actual bond, not just literary invention or convention on the part of Bede. Defining the concept of friendship is tricky for the early medieval period. Gerd Althoff considers relationships marked as *amicus* as signs of friendship alliance which formed a cooperative pairing. This form of bond can take place within the context of warfare, and thus, can also be brief. However, he discounts that these bonds had any emotional attachments.[553] This view of medieval friendship discounts the emotionality, and performative aspects found within these same bonds of friendship.[554] It is dangerous to assume medieval individuals shared modern sentiments. However, it is equally detrimental to assume emotion was wholly absent. This is true for disregarding Penda's vehemence against Oswiu in the years leading up to *Winwæd* as well. It can be argued that the marriages between Alhfrith and Cyneburh, in addition to Peada and Alhflæd, attempted to end hostilities between the warring kingdoms and are examples of peaceweaving. However, assumptions of peaceweaving unions limits our contextual picture, disregarding the existence

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[547] See chapter two.
[548] Bede, *HE* iii.16 and 17 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 263–65) and 24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 289–91); *HB* ch. 64 and 65 (ed. Morris, 38).
[549] See chapter two.
[550] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 289–91).
[551] "…who was determined to raze and destroy his (Oswiu) people from the small all the way up to the great…": Ibid.
[552] Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 228–9.
[553] Gerd Althoff, *Family, Friends and Followers: Bonds and Social Bonds in Early Medieval Europe*, trans. Christopher Carroll (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 65–90.
[554] Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy, *Medieval Sensibilities: A History of Emotions in the Middle Ages*, trans. Robert Shaw (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 50–57. Also see: Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2006), 113–4, n. 60.

of other bonds and the complex political situation between Deira and Bernicia occurring around this time.

To understand the presence of a strategy, which does seem to have been behind these two marriages, we need to look beyond the apparent peaceweaving marriage alliance. This will help to explain and illuminate the impresario behind these two matches. Wragg attributes the instigation of both marriages to the Mercian royal family, which according to her was the family's attempt to cool tempers and extend influence.[555] Building from Wragg's suggestion, I instead argue that Oswiu is responsible for orchestrating these matches for the purpose of subversively using the principles of peaceweaving against Penda and the kingdom of Mercia.

To begin explaining how Oswiu subversively used peaceweaving marriages against the Mercian ruling family, I must pivot and dig deeper into the political climate of Northumbria during the mid-seventh century. Northumbria had been suffering from increased attacks originating from Mercia, the Mercian subkingdoms and their allies beginning in Edwin's reign.[556] As a direct result, many of Northumbria's kings had been slain because of the continued conflicts. Kings Edwin, Osric, Eanfrith, and Oswald had all been killed during battle by either Mercian forces led by King Penda, or a combination of Mercian and Brittonic forces.[557] While Edwin and Oswald both ruled over a combined Northumbria, the kingdom seems to have split into the separate kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia immediately after both rulers' deaths. Thus, after Edwin's death, Osric succeeded to Deira and Eanfrith to Bernicia. After Oswald's death it appears Northumbria split once more with Oswiu, Oswald's brother, taking Bernicia and one of Edwin's relatives, Oswine, succeeding in Deira. However, Oswiu was not content with only holding Bernicia and had Oswine treacherously murdered.[558] However, this event becomes relevant to this discussion because Oswiu's actions may suggest he was willing to use unconventional methods to expand his rule — the betrayal and murder of his wife's kinsman, Oswine. This may extend to include mobilising his children to marry into certain elite families to bring about the downfall of his enemies: a subversive use of marriage.

To explain how Oswiu was able to orchestrate marriages with members of Penda's family — who was actively seeking his submission — I want to examine why Penda may have approved or desired these matches despite his dislike of Oswiu. Penda's motives to accept these marriages were certainly affected by Northumbrian politics, and ultimately may lie with the matrilineal networks of Oswiu's children.

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[555] Wragg, *Early English Queens*, 174–75 and 181.
[556] See chapter two.
[557] Bede, *HE* ii.20 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 203); iii.1 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 213–15) and iii.9 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 241–43).
[558] Bede, *HE* iii.14 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 256–7).

Addressing some chronological inconsistencies that occur with Alhfrith and Cyneburh's marriage are important to begin this discussion and will begin illuminating these matrilineal networks. Firstly, the given date of Peada's conversion, and his marriage to Alhflæd which occurred simultaneously, is 653.[559] Thus, the marriage between Alhfrith and Cyneburh happened either earlier in the same year or more likely sometime prior. The date of 653, importantly, leads to questions of maternity for Alhfrith. Oswiu's only spouse mentioned by Bede was Eanflæd, the sole remaining offspring of Edwin. The marriage between Oswiu and Eanflæd took place no earlier than 643 based on Eanflæd's age and Oswiu's assumption to the throne.[560] If Eanflæd was Alhfrith's mother, as some assume, he would have been at most nine years old at the time of his marriage to Cyneburh based on a marriage date of 653. This would have been a questionable marriage, especially within a Christian context. While canon law did not officially have an age of consent, Church leaders followed Roman law which had long understood the age of marriage for girls was twelve and for boys fourteen.[561] Additionally, Alhfrith seems to have been one of the acting subkings of Deira alongside Oethelwald, Oswald's son, by this time.[562] Because of this discrepancy in his age, I suspect Alhfrith, and his sister Alhflæd were likely children from one of Oswiu's previous, obscure unions to a British princess named Rieinmellt.[563]

This connection to a British princess illuminates one potential reason for Penda's approval of his daughter's union to Alhfrith. Rieinmellt is listed as one of two wives, the other being Eanflæd, in the *HB*. We are also informed that Rieinmellt was the daughter of Royth, the grandson of King Urien of Rheged, a Brittonic kingdom located in modern-day Cumbria.[564] Her mention as Oswiu's wife in the *HB* is the only confirmation of this relationship, although her name appears in Durham's *Liber Vitae* under the list of queens.[565] Fiona Edmonds

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[559] Bede, *HE* v.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 565).
[560] Eanflæd was born in 626. The latest date the marriage could have occurred is sometime in 651 because the man tasked to retrieve her from Kent was blessed by Bishop Aidan who died in this year. See: Bede, *HE* iii.15 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 260–1) and v.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 564–5).
[561] See: Kim M. Phillips, "Maidenhood as the Perfect Age of Woman's Life," in *Young Medieval Women*, ed. Katherine Lewis, Noel Menuge and Kim Phillips (Thrupp: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 4–5; Andrew Riggsby, *Roman Law and the Legal World of the Romans* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 106–8.
[562] Alhfrith's position as king of Deira is based on evidence found in Bede's prose *VSC*, which mentions that he gave land from his kingdom to Abbot Eata for the establishment of Ripon. Ripon is located within the borders of the former kingdom of Deira. This has led scholars to believe that he was a subking of Deira under his father Oswiu. See: *VSC*, ch. 7 (ed. Colgrave 174–75). That Alhfrith ruled in conjunction with Oethelwald stems from his acknowledged rulership during this time. He appears infrequently in the *HE* and it is assumed that he disappears after the battle of *Winwæd*. Bede, *HE* iii.14 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 255) and iii.23 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 287).
[563] *HB*, ch. 57 (ed. Morris, 36). Wragg agrees that Alhfrith, and furthermore, Alhflæd, were from Oswiu's previous relationship: *Early English Queens*, 177. This was first hypothesised by: Molly Miller, "The dates of Deira," *ASE* 8 (1979): 43, no. 4.
[564] Andrew Breeze, 'Northumbria and the Family of Rhun,' *Northern History* 50, no. 2 (2013): 170–79; Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 10–14.
[565] *The Durham Liber Vitae*, volume I, ed. David and Lynda Rollason (London: The British Library, 2007), 42.

suspects Oswald was responsible for their marriage because of Northumbria's economic interest in Rheged and other Brittonic kingdoms lying to the north and west.[566] Since Rheged bordered the Irish Sea, its ports saw the importing of goods from Ireland, Francia and the Mediterranean as attested to by archaeological findings.[567] By Oswald securing the marriage of his brother, Oswiu, to Rieinmellt, an elite woman of Rheged, relations between Rheged and Northumbria would have hopefully remained amicable. Thus, Northumbria would have had access to rich ports. While we cannot date this marriage, it certainly took place well before Oswiu succeeded his brother and his subsequent marriage to Eanflæd. Whether Rieinmellt died or was repudiated is not known, but Alhfrith remained with his father in Northumbria.

Alhfrith's maternal connection to the Brittonic kingdom of Rheged may have contributed to Penda's interest in this particular marriage because of the economic potential. By marrying Cyneburh to Alhfrith, Penda would have created ties of kinship to a potentially influential kingdom with trade routes in the Irish Sea. While Rheged was under Northumbrian influence since at least Edwin's reign, Penda may have been trying to disrupt these Northumbrian interests. Far from ending conflict, Penda may have hoped to stir more conflict with Cyneburh's marriage to Alhfrith. The question is whether Alhfrith had contact with his maternal kin and whether Penda would have had the access his daughter would have to these familial connections. This requires further examination into medieval systems of reckoning kinship and how medieval families viewed, what we term today, extended kinship. But this is beyond the scope of this thesis, and so this discussion must remain, to a certain extent, speculative.

There are other potential motives for Penda's decision to allow Cyneburh's marriage to Alhfrith which were politically expedient and topographically motivated. Alhfrith as a co-ruler of Deira had control of the southernmost kingdom of Northumbria. The condition of Alhfrith's early relationship with his father is unknown, but it has been assumed they were on good terms. However, Bede's remark that he later attacked Oswiu and his subsequent disappearance from the record may indicate the relationship eventually soured.[568] The seeds of enmity could have been sown during Alhfrith's marriage to Cyneburh and his allowing Penda through Deira without resistance. As stated previously, Penda seemed to focus his attacks on Bernician royal centres (Bamburgh and Lindisfarne) during Oswiu's reign.[569] The only evidence of hostility in Deira was the location of *Winwæd* near Leeds, and this battle took place when Penda was marching back to Mercia after a Northern campaign.[570] Penda

[566] Edmonds, *Gaelic Influence*, 38–9.
[567] For more, see: Edwards, *Archaeology of Early Ireland*, 66–98; Mike McCarthy, "The Kingdom of Rheged: A Landscape Perspective," *Northern History* 48, no. 1 (2011): 9–22; Edmonds, *Gaelic Influence*, 29–31.
[568] Bede, iii.14 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 254–5).
[569] Bede, *HE* iii.16 and 17 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 262–65).
[570] See chapter two.

may have been taken off guard because of the Deiran location. With Cyneburh married to Deira's ruler, movement through Deira may have potentially been open to Penda, which would have created a relatively safe and direct route to Bernician lands. Deira certainly benefitted from the kinship connection. Alhfrith's kingdom escaped the worst of Penda's attacks for which we have evidence, and Deira's safety from Mercian attacks may have been an immediate benefit for Oswiu, unbeknownst to his rival. Penda would focus attacks on northern Northumbria (Bernicia) instead of in territories where Oswiu had less control. Oswiu appears to have had no hereditary claim to the Deiran throne due to differing maternity. Because of this, his claims to Deira were not strong; hence, Oethelwald, who had the better claim, was co-ruler with Alhfrith. By keeping Penda out of Deira, Oswiu stabilised a possibly unstable kingdom under his *imperium*. Because Cyneburh's marriage to one of Deira's rulers made strategic sense for both Mercia and Northumbria, Penda would not have suspected that Oswiu had ulterior motives behind the match.

If Oswiu's intention was to ensure Penda's focus on an intentional portion of Northumbria, the kingdom of Bernicia, then it seems his plan worked. Deira was safe from Penda's attacks, thus luring the Mercian elite into a false sense of security in this region. Oswiu was subversively using the principles of a peaceweaving marriage against his enemy. This false sense of security in Deira may have led to Alhfrith's friendship with Peada. Whether this friendship was part of Oswiu's plan cannot be known, but I suspect that Alhfrith and Cyneburh's marriage was instrumental in introducing Peada to Alhflæd. I find it odd that after gaining the throne of the Middle Angles, Peada went almost directly travel to Oswiu's royal *vill* of *Ad Murum* (Walbottle) located in Bernicia asking specifically for Alhflæd. I suggest that Alhfrith, acting alongside or according to his father's plans, had influenced Peada into the match with his sister. Whether this was part of a highly orchestrated plan, or more of a convenient puzzle piece cannot be known. The marriage to Alhflæd certainly would have given Peada connections to a powerful kingdom. Additionally, the prestige associated with such a marriage would have been extremely beneficial to a king who had recently gained his kingdom. Peada's marriage to Alhflæd further cemented the familial connection between the two royal families, a fact that Oswiu may have sought because Penda seems to have increased his attacks on Bernicia around this time.

Lulled into a false sense of security because he assumed the marriage alliances between the Mercian and Northumbrian families operated in their sociologically accepted form, Penda met his fate at the end of his final attack on Bernicia. His final campaign at Iudeu in Bernicia was apparently a military success. Bede insists that Penda refused all Oswiu's attempts to purchase peace which he describes as *innumera et maiora… ornamenta regis vel*

donaria because Penda was intent on wiping out all Bernicians.[571] However, the Brittonic *HB* remembers this event differently, with Penda accepting the peace payment and then distributing the treasure amongst his allies before traveling back to their respective kingdoms.[572] Higham proposed Penda's last incursion into Bernicia was a reaction to Peada's marriage to Alhflæd.[573] However, this disregards that Penda had already married a daughter to Oswiu's son. Furthermore, Bede claims King Æthelhere of the East Angles was the cause of the war, the answer of which has long eluded scholars.[574] I suspect that Penda viewed his fight to be with Oswiu, not his son-in-law or daughter-in-law. They were independent actors with their own kingdoms giving them a level of independence. Until they acted against him, Penda may have not considered them a threat.

This follows an observed pattern for marriage negotiations in early pre-Conquest England. Sources detailing marriages illustrate the male suitor either traveling or sending messengers to the royal court of the intended bride's family. The *vita beate Sexburge regine* states that Seaxburh, an East Anglian princess, had several suitors travel to her father's court to vie for her hand, and Saint Æthelthryth was highly sought after as well.[575] Edwin sent messengers to Kent seeking Æthelburh's hand in marriage, and Oswiu himself sent his priest Utta to bring Eanflæd back to Northumbria from Kent for marriage.[576] That men would initiate the marriage process is also confirmed by the late tenth-century OE text, *Be wifmannes beweddunge*.[577] Most of the elite men seeking marriage in these instances had often just gained their kingdoms and were seeking a powerfully connected queen. This pattern indicates that Alhfrith would have seemed to act in his own right as a newly crowned co-ruler of Deira when seeking Cyneburh's hand. However, Oswiu had likely approved of his son's actions, in fact, he was surely the one behind Alhfrith's marriage request. This was the first move in Oswiu's strategy.

The culmination of Oswiu's plan, using marriage ties to undermine Mercian power and expansion, occurred at the battle of *Winwæd*. This was likely Oswiu's intent behind the matches all along: the creation of a false sense of security in certain areas and with certain individuals. Penda, with his allied forces, marched directly through Deira and was attacked by

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[571] "an incalculable and considerable amount of royal jewels or gifts": Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 290–1).
[572] The *HB* terms this event the *Atbret Iudeu*, or the 'Distribution of Iudeu': *HB* ch. 65 (ed. Morris, 38).
[573] Higham, *An English empire*, 67 and 168.
[574] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 290–1).
[575] *VSex*, ch. 2 (ed. Love, 140–1); Æthelthryth's second husband was Ecgfrith and it seems he was much younger than she was at the time of their marriage. She also had to stay married to him for 12 years before he finally allowed the marriage to be dissolved. For more on the implications of Ecgfrith and Æthelthryth's marriage, see: Katherine Bullimore, "Unpicking the web: the divorce of Ecgfrith and Æthelthryth," *Revue européenne d'histoire* 16, no.6 (2009): 835–54.
[576] Bede, *HE* ii.9 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 162–63) and iii.15 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 260–1).
[577] Cardwell, "*Be wifmannes beweddunge*," 90.

Oswiu's forces near the district of *Loidis* (Leeds).[578] Penda had likely chosen this route because of an assumed level of safety in Deira, his son-in-law's kingdom. Furthermore, Penda likely did not expect to be attacked in this location by the smaller Northumbrian force.[579] Oswiu had the element of surprise on his side and had been working behind the scenes to ensure an advantageous outcome. Oswiu's orchestrations could explain Alhfrith's involvement in the battle on the side of the disadvantaged Northumbrian force. Oethelwald may have also been part of Oswiu's plans. Despite Bede stating that Oethelwald was part of Penda's force, he notes that Oethelwald pulled back moments before the battle began.[580] Because of this, I suspect he may have been part of the strategy regardless of Bede's statements. Additionally, one of Penda's Brittonic allies, Cadafael of Gwynedd, had fled the night prior indicating he may have known about Oswiu's plans beforehand.[581] It is difficult to believe that a king of Gwynedd, one of Mercia's longstanding allies, had chosen independently to desert Penda in the middle of the night right before the battle. Oswiu's interference would go a long way to explain Cadafael's abandonment and the outcome of *Winwæd*. Either way, Oswiu must have been confident of success because his son Ecgfrith was a hostage of the Mercian royal court at the time of the attack, likely the result of a previous peace negotiation.[582]

My argument for Oswiu's underlying subversive strategy behind these marriages would also help to explain events after *Winwæd*. Oswiu took control of Mercia for three years and placed his *princepes* in power throughout Northern Mercia, approximately 7,000 hides north of the Trent River. Peada retained control of Southern Mercia, 5,000 hides below the Trent, an area that was closely equivalent to that of his territories in Middle Anglia.[583] Bede claims that Peada retained these lands due to his status as Oswiu's co*gnatus*, but it is possible that his father-in-law later ensured his death so that these lands passed to him. The next spring (c. 656), Peada was killed, reportedly by his own wife, Queen Alhflæd, who had apparently decided to poison him at the Easter celebration.[584] After Peada's death, Oswiu took control of Mercia for three years until 658 when Wulfhere regained Mercia.

By re-examining the marriages of Alhfrith and Peada beyond their classification as peaceweaving marriage alliances, I have revealed a carefully orchestrated political strategy.

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[578] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 292–3).
[579] Both Bede and the *HB* describe that Penda had a large force made up of Mercians, other 'famous ealdormen', English kings, and Britons. Bede describes thirty legions (*HE* iii.24), and whilst the *HB* does not offer an amount, it does describe that there were many Brittonic kings in attendance (ch. 64 and 65).
[580] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 290–1).
[581] *HB* ch. 65 (ed. Morris, 38).
[582] He was being held by Penda's wife, Queen Cynewise. When he became a hostage is unknown because this is the only piece of evidence for his time at the Mercian court. However, hostages were held to ensure the cooperation of other kingdoms, and Oswiu was directly violating this understanding. See: Adam Kosto, *Hostages in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 24.
[583] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 294–5).
[584] Ibid.

Northumbria had been suffering from increased attacks from Mercia and their allies beginning in Edwin's reign, and Oswiu was seeking an end to both Penda's attacks and growing *imperium* — an *imperium* he coveted.[585] Penda was a direct competitor to Oswiu's quest to (re-)gain the territory and status that his predecessors had enjoyed, and consequently Oswiu developed a plan to suppress Penda through the marriage of his children. By marrying his son and daughter to Penda's children, he had created a false sense of security with the Deiran portion of the Northumbrian royal family. This plan also isolated Penda's attacks to Bernicia where Oswiu had better control. Ultimately Penda's downfall at *Winwæd* occurred just as Oswiu had intended, through Penda's false security in marriage networks and socio-cultural expectations.

Æthelred and Osthryth: a true example of peaceweaving?

After Peada's death and subsequent disappearance of Alhfrith from the record after 664, Mercia and Northumbria no longer had any connections by marriage. It is unclear when Alhfrith and Cyneburh's marriage ended. However, we know Cyneburh had retired at some point to her monastery at Castor near Peterborough Abbey (*Medeshamstede*). No further marriage attempts between the two families would occur during Oswiu's lifetime, likely because of his probable plot against Mercia. After his death in 670, Oswiu's son Ecgfrith succeeded to the Northumbrian throne, while his brother Ælfwine was likely the subking of Deira.[586] During Ecgfrith's reign, skirmishes resumed between Mercia and Northumbria, and this was mainly over the control of Lindsey.[587] King Wulfhere of Mercia had lost control of Lindsey sometime at the end of his reign between 673 and 675.[588] However, his brother and successor, Æthelred, was able to regain control sometime around 679. This was the year a large battle between Northumbria and Mercia occurred at the river Trent.[589] After this battle, Ecgfrith's ambitions appear to focus on the western Brittonic kingdoms, where he would later perish in battle in 685.[590]

Sometime during these events, the last known seventh-century marriage between Mercia and Northumbria occurred between Æthelred and Osthryth, Ecgfrith's sister. The date

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[585] See chapter two.
[586] Bede, *HE* iv.5 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 348–9); *ASC* A 670 (ed. Bately 31). Ælfwine is given the title of king by both Bede and the *VW*. The *VW* details that after his death in battle, Ælfwine's body was taken to York, a royal city of Deira. This has been taken to indicate that he was the subking of Deira. See: Bede, *HE* iv.22 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 400–1); *VW* ch. 17 and 24 (ed. Colgrave, 36–7 and 50–1).
[587] Bede, *HE* iv.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 370–71); Bede, *HE* iv.21 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 400–1); *VW* ch. 20 (ed. Colgrave, 42–3).
[588] *VW* ch. 20 (ed. Colgrave, 42–3) and Bede, *HE* iv.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 370–71).
[589] Bede, *HE* iv.21 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 400–1).
[590] Bede, *HE* iv. 26 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 426–31); *ASC* E 685 (ed. Irvine, 33).

of this marriage, like many early marriages, is unknown. However, it is clear that Osthryth had married Æthelred by 679.[591] What points to this conclusion is that Ælfwine, who died during the battle at Trent, was beloved in both kingdoms.[592] Bede notes further that Mercia loved Ælfwine because his sister Osthryth had married Æthelred, and this intimates the marriage was already well established and not newly conducted.

Events prior to 679 indicate a possible window for Æthelred and Osthryth's marriage. During Wulfhere's reign, it appears he was reluctant to work with Northumbria, including contracting possible marriages. Wulfhere instead had focused attention on the southern kingdoms, evidenced by his and his brother, Merewalh's marriage to Kentish elite women. I will discuss this further below. Wulfhere's one recorded campaign against Northumbria, detailed in the *VW*, saw his defeat and the loss of Lindsey.[593] The author of the *VW* also informs the reader that Ecgfrith placed Mercia under tribute, and after Wulfhere's death in 675, possibly ruled Mercia for a short time. Æthelred certainly had had troubles at the beginning of his reign which I discussed in chapter two. It could be that Æthelred's marriage to Osthryth occurred sometime in 675 to help Æthelred stabilise the rocky beginning of his rule. A marriage at this date would have given the Mercian people ample time to create emotional connections with Ælfwine. Although, I am less willing to except the *VW*'s claims that Ecgfrith held some sort of *imperium* over Mercia because the text originates from Northumbria which indicates possible bias and motive for inflating Ecgfrith's position.

Æthelred's motivations behind forming this marriage could certainly be multivalent. After an extended period of turbulent interactions, Æthelred was likely searching for a way to heal relations between Mercia and Northumbria while also attempting to establish a secure northern borderland. After losing the subkingdom of Lindsey, this may have been necessary because there was no longer a buffer zone.[594] At this time, Æthelred's sights were focused on continuing the expansion of Mercian interests in southern England begun by Wulfhere. A secure borderland to the north was essential during concentrated military efforts in the south. Æthelred likely viewed marriage to Osthryth as the best course of action to achieve a lessening of northern tensions: a classic example of a peaceweaving marriage alliance.

Because of previous and frequent dealings with Northumbria, he was likely already aware of Osthryth's availability. Furthermore, he may have been more inclined to approach

[591] For example: Miller, "Dates of Deira," 43; Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 82; Higham, *Ecgfrith*, 158.
[592] Bede, *HE* iv.21 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 400–1).
[593] *VW* ch. 20 (ed. Colgrave, 42–3) and Bede, *HE* iv.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 370–71).
[594] See chapter two.

Ecgfrith because of the Northumbrian king's time as a Mercian hostage.[595] Whether they had known one another during Ecgfrith's time at the Mercian court is not clear. However, it is possible both parties viewed the match as beneficial. Osthryth's marriage to Æthelred had the potential to heal the distrust that Oswiu's subversive actions had created, and Æthelred sought to contract an alliance to repair relations between his kingdom and the Northumbrian kingdoms.

As stated at the outset of this chapter, however, I want to examine each marriage through a poststructural lens, and looking deeper, it is a possibility that Æthelred and Osthryth's marriage included an exchange of lands. Elite marriages had some aspect of gift exchange, with elite brides and grooms bringing treasure and lands.[596] We certainly have comparative examples for exchanged lands in Francia. As part of the marriage negotiations between Galswinth and Chilperic, five cities were given to her as *morgangabe* (Bordeaux, Limoges, Cahors, Lescar, and Cietat) which were later claimed by Brunhild because she was Galswith's sister.[597] A further example are the cities given to Fredegund by Chilperic which she used as a stream of revenue.[598]

As part of marriage negotiations, Æthelred may have requested the return of at least parts of Lindsey. Ecgfrith would surely have been unwilling to part with the entire kingdom, but it is possible that a few estates could have been transferred as part of Osthryth's dowry. It is generally assumed that Lindsey was regained after the battle of Trent.[599] However, no source confirms that this was the case.[600] It is possible Æthelred regained Lindsey back sooner than previously thought because of the couple's involvement in the monastic community at Bardney located in Lindsey. It is thought that Bardney was founded by Æthelred and Osthryth because of their heavy involvement and later burial there.[601] Throughout their reign, Bardney enjoyed their favour and benefaction.[602] Osthryth was particularly involved in monastic politics at

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[595] Ecgfrith was forty years of age when he was slain in 685, which indicates that he was around the age of ten when he was a hostage held by Queen Cynewise. Æthelred's age at this time is unknown. *ASC* E 685 (ed. Irvine, 33); Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 290–1) and iv.26 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors 428–31).
[596] For pre-Conquest England, see: Fell, *Women in England*, 56–73; Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma & Queen Edith*, 66–75 and 123–42 and "Queens and Treasure in the Early Middle Ages," in *Treasure in the Medieval West*, ed. Tyler (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2000), 61–82; Julia Crick, "Women, Posthumous Benefaction, and Family Strategy in Pre-Conquest England," *JBS* 38, no. 4 (1999): 399–422; Cardwell, "*Be wifmannes beweddunge*," 93–4.
[597] *HF* iv.28 (ed. Krusch and Levison, 160–61) and ix.20 (ed. Krusch and Levison, 434–41).
[598] *HF* v.34 (ed. Krusch and Levison, 238–41)
[599] Colgrave and Mynors assumed this in their edition of the *HE*, but they may have followed Stenton in this assumption. *HE*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 370, n. 3; Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 85
[600] Bede only informs us that *wergild* was paid to Ecgfrith for the death of his brother, Ælfwine. Bede, *HE* iv.21 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 400–1).
[601] Their later burial at Bardney could indicate Mercian strategies of power consolidation. Rollason, "Saints' resting places". I discuss Bardney further in chapter four.
[602] Bede, *HE* iii.11 (ed Colgrave and Mynors, 246–47).

Bardney, but this involvement could be evidence of later Mercian power consolidation.[603] Possible land exchange is further complicated because in 678 Ecgfrith placed his father's priest, Eadhæd, as bishop of Lindsey.[604] However, if Æthelred and Osthryth only received the estate on which they founded Bardney, this would not have prevented Ecgfrith's appointment of Eadhæd.

We certainly have probable evidence for part of Osthryth's *morgengabe* given to her by Æthelred, which becomes important in chapter four, but I discuss here to illustrate aspects of marriage exchange. Land at Fladbury is connected to Osthryth by charter and Thomas of Marlborough's *History of the Abbey of Evesham*.[605] While familial connections described by Marlborough are suspect, his description of Osthryth's original ownership of the lands appear authentic, and is further confirmed by Osthryth's appearance in S 76, the first instance of a Mercian queen within a charter.[606] It is interesting and unusual that Osthryth's name is present in this particular charter because the estimated donation date of 697 x 699 indicates it would have been a posthumous grant as she was murdered in 697.[607] Because of her presence, I argue that Æthelred made a grant to Bishop Oftfor using lands previously belonging to Osthryth. Beyond the grant at Fladbury, however, nothing else is known about other possible lands attached to Osthryth. However, that her presence in S 76 remains extant is miraculous. With this piece of evidence, I can say there were exchange of lands during their marriage.

The marriage between Æthelred and Osthryth was contracted to benefit both Mercia and Northumbria, which is a classic example of a peaceweaving marriage alliance. It served many purposes, but most importantly, the healing of past events. After Oswiu's subversive use of marriage to orchestrate the downfall of Penda, ridding him of his most important rival, it was necessary that Mercia and Northumbria healed the rift that had been created. Æthelred may have already known Osthryth because of the frequent dealings between the two kingdoms which can only be described as familial politics. Marriage to Osthryth not only helped to reunite the two families once more, but she also brought an important exchange of land potentially in the kingdom of Lindsey. This exchange explains their foundation of and heavy involvement in the monastery at Bardney located in Lindsey.

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[603] Alan Thacker, "Kings, Saints, and Monasteries in Pre-Viking Mercia," *Midland History* 10, no. 1 (1985): 2–4.
[604] Bede, *HE* iii.28 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 316–17) and iv.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 370–71).
[605] See chapter two.
[606] For a preliminary study on later Mercian queens in charters, see: Reeuwijk, "Witnessing to her position".
[607] Bede, *HE* v.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 564–65). For the dating of S 76, see: Scharer, *Königsurkunde*, 152–4.

3.3 – The Unions Between Mercia, Kent, and Essex: Mercian Strategy in the South

Marriages between the Mercian royal family and the elite families of the southern kingdoms have been less prevalent in Mercian historiography when compared to the marriages with Northumbria. This is likely attributable to a lack of more contemporary sources, but as I explained in the introduction, later sources can be just as rich a source of information. Mercian marriages to elite members of southern kingdoms can only be found in sources that originate in the twelfth-century or later. These are the *Liber Eliensis*, the texts of the *Mildrith Legend*, the *vitae* of St Osyth, and texts of the Ely saints written by Goscelin of St Bertin.[608] I discussed the issues surrounding these texts in the introduction of this thesis. In this section, I explore the Mercian royal family's marriages to the elite families in the south. These marriages took place primarily during Wulfhere's reign between 658 to 675, but some may have occurred later during Æthelred's reign. When compared to the Mercian marriages between Northumbria, the southern unions appear to be connecting southern elite families in areas of economic importance and areas in which the Mercian royal family sought *imperium*. But this does not necessarily indicate that these were marriage alliances which formed overlordship or obligation. These matches solidified Mercian influence in targeted areas and the absence of unions to other kingdoms indicates there was certainly a strategy behind this focus. In this section, I will first examine the familial connections between Mercia and Kent, and then move to a possible marriage with Essex.

3.3.1 – Mercian and Kentish Unions of the Mid-Seventh Century

Sometime during the mid-seventh century, two marriages were contracted between Mercia and Kent. One was between King Merewalh of the Magonsætan, and a Kentish princess named Domne Eafe. The other was Wulfhere's marriage to another Kentish princess, Eormenhild. Both marriages can be viewed in image 3.4. These particular connections between Kent and Mercia are explicitly detailed in the *genealogia* of the various texts which compose the *Mildrith Legend*. Recensions of the *Mildrith Legend* according to Rollason appear to be derived from an earlier eighth-century text which indicates this genealogy is likely

[608] See: E.O. Blake, ed., *Liber Eliensis*, Camden Third Series, Vol. XCII (London: Royal Historical Society, 1962); Janet Fairweather, trans., *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely From the Seventh Century to the Twelfth* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005); D.W. Rollason, *The Mildrith Legend: A Study in Early Medieval Hagiography in England* (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1982); David Bethell reconstructed the various versions in, "The Lives of St. Osyth of Essex and St. Osyth of Aylesbury," *Analecta Bollandiana* 88 (1970): 75–127; Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, *The Hagiography of the Female Saints of Ely*, OMT, ed. Rosalind Love (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004).

authentic.[609] Furthermore, early charters from Minster-in-Thanet support the *Mildrith Legend*'s claims by alluding to connections with the Mercian royal family.[610] Therefore, questions of reliability for the hagiographical texts found in this cycle are diminished.

The general outline of the *Mildrith Legend* begins with Æthelberht, the king of Kent during the Gregorian mission to England. We are told that he had two known children, Eadbald and Æthelburh, with his Frankish queen Bertha.[611] Æthelburh would go on to marry Edwin of Northumbria around 625, and her brother, Eadbald, would succeed to the throne in 616. Eadbald created quite the scandal after his assumption because he took his father's unnamed widow as his wife.[612] This unnamed woman was certainly not his biological mother because Æthelberht had been put to rest next to Bertha in the chapel of St. Martin, indicating that Bertha had passed earlier.[613] Eadbald would later repudiate this unknown woman due to pressure from the Church and according to most texts in the *Legend*, he later married a Frankish woman by the name of Ymme.[614] This marriage to a Frankish princess re-established connections to Gaul and the continent, although determining Ymme's natal family is impossible without further evidence. Three children resulted from Eadbald and Ymme's marriage: one daughter named Eanswith, and two sons named Eorcenberht and Eormenred. Eanswith would never marry, instead receiving a grant of land to establish the monastery at Folkstone. However, their two sons would themselves make prestigious matches with royal women from East Anglia and, what I argue, was Northumbria.

What follows are brief examinations of the marriage connections made first by Domne Eafe's parents, followed by Eormenhild's parents. I do this to explore the familial connections of Domne Eafe and Eormenhild, something which may have enhanced Mercian desire for these particular marriages. After each description of the parents, I will then look to Domne Eafe and Eormenhild's marriages to Merewalh and Wulfhere, respectively. Furthermore, I attempt to

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[609] For more, see the detailed explanation of the textual tradition found in: Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 15–31 and 33.

[610] A few of the authentic charters of Minster-in-Thanet, beginning in the 690s, connect or list members found only in the *Legend*. Specifically, charter S 14 which lists the previous owner of a land parcel as a certain *Irminredus* (presumably Eormenred) which is being given to Abbess Æbba of Minster-in-Thanet. Additionally, a later charter (S 91) detailing a toll remission granted to Eadburh by King Æthelbald lists the impetus of the grant as Æthelbald's *amore consanguinitatis religiose abbatisse Mildrede* (the love of kinship to the sacred Abbess Mildrith). See: 43 and 51, *Anglo-Saxon Charters IV, Charters of St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury and Minster-in-Thanet*, ed. Kelly (Oxford: The British Academy, 1995), 151–53 and 175–78; Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 37–39.

[611] Bertha's connections to Francia are confirmed by both Bede and Gregory of Tours. Additionally, Æthelberht and Bertha's children are also confirmed by Bede: Bede, *HE* i.25, ii.5 and 9; Gregory of Tours, *HF* iv.26 (ed. Krusch and Levison, 157).

[612] Bede, *HE* ii.5. There is a similar incident which occurred after King Æthelwulf of Wessex's death (c.855–858). Æthelbald, his son, succeeded to part of the kingdom and took his stepmother, Judith, as his wife (*ASC* A, D, E 855; *ASC* C, F 856; Asser, *Life of Alfred*, ch. 17). A study on this particular phenomenon has not yet taken place and is beyond the scope of this thesis.

[613] Bede, *HE* ii.5 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 150–1).

[614] These are the texts listed in Rollason's study as: Bodley 285, *Vita Mildrethae* (Goscelin), *Vita Mildburgae*, *Vita Werburgae*, *Genealogia Regum Cantuariorum*, and *Þa Halgan*.

date the discussed unions to try and place them within a political timeframe. By examining the familial connections and the dates in which these marriages occurred, I offer a deeper understanding of the intentions behind each match.

Eormenred and Oslafa

I will begin with Domne Eafe's parents, Eormenred and Oslafa, and their possible date of marriage. This becomes important because it will give us a time range for Domne Eafe's marriage to Merewalh in the next section. Eormenred was likely the first of Eadbald's sons to marry. However, his union with Oslafa is impossible to date with certainty. I suggest it occurred sometime between 634 and 640 based on the events detailed in this section.[615] The couple would go on to produce two sons, Æthelberht and Æthelred, and three daughters, Eormengith, Domne Eafe, and Eormenburh. There are no definitive dates which could narrow my estimated timeline for their marriage, beyond their daughter, Domne Eafe's death date. Her death is estimated to have occurred sometime after 696 but before 724, a period far too ambiguous for any definitive determination.[616] This leads me to use inferred evidence for dating this marriage.

The most important inference is the onomastic evidence for Oslafa's name. The first naming element, Os-, which constructs Oslafa's name may indicate she had connections to a Northumbrian royal family. This particular naming element had a high concentration in only two kingdoms during the seventh century: Bernicia and the Hwicce.[617] The Hwiccan kingdom would have been a good match for Kent and was closer in distance. However, as I discussed in chapter two, the beginnings of the Hwiccan kingdom are shrouded in mystery. Furthermore, the naming element Os- did not appear in the Hwiccan royal family until after Wulfhere took the Mercian throne in 658. Therefore, it is more likely Oslafa originated from the northern kingdom of Bernicia, and events surrounding my given dating of 634 to 640 for Oslafa's marriage to Eormenred further support this origin.

These are the events which transpired after the dramatic conclusion of the battle of *Hœthfelth*.[618] At the battle's conclusion, Edwin's widow, Æthelburh, fled to her natal kingdom of

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[615] I will discuss dating below. Oslafa is in the *Passio Beatorum Martyrum Ethelredi atque Ethelbricti* found in: Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 93.
[616] This is based on charter evidence for Minster-in-Thanet which has a toll remission given to Æbba in 696 (S 18) and then in 724 another remission given to her successor Mildrith (S 1180). Rollason linked the Æbba found in early charters to Domne Eafe based on onomastic mutation. Others agree with his findings. See: Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 34–35; Kelly, *Charters of St. Augustine's*, xxv.
[617] This concentration of names beginning with Os-, led Finberg to conclude the Bernician and Hwiccan royal families were connected. See: Finberg, *ECWM*, 167–80. I discussed this in chapter two.
[618] Bede, *HE* ii.20 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 202–5).

Kent with the remaining Deiran royal children and Bishop Paulinus. Despite fleeing to safety, Æthelburh felt that her son Uscfrea and his nephew Yffi (son of Osfrith) were not safe in her brother's kingdom. Bede informs us that Æthelburh felt her brother Eadbald and Oswald, Edwin's successor, were threats to the male youths. The reasons for Æthelburh's fear of her own kin are unknown, but her fear was poignant enough to impel her to send the two boys to Francia to King Dagobert's court. Because Oswald succeeded to the Northumbrian throne a year after Edwin's death, sometime in 634, this indicates Æthelburh had likely been in Kent for at least a year before sending the boys to Francia.

With this context, I suggest that Oswald had travelled to Kent either in search of his Deiran rivals and/or to renew Northumbrian and Kentish ties through marriage. Oslafa may have been this Northumbrian connection and Æthelburh's fear could have been prompted by Eadbald and Oswald's renewal of familial ties. Oswald was Bernician, and therefore, Æthelburh's deceased husband's rival and a direct threat to the royal children under her care. Oswald had already made his presence known in the southern kingdoms by first traveling to Wessex and sponsoring the baptism of King Cynegisl and his subsequent marriage to Cynegisl's daughter.[619] Thus, creation of familial ties to Kent required another royal family member. Æthelburh had likely already been given land at Lyminge to establish her monastery, and her daughter Eanflæd was still too young for marriage having been born in 626.[620] Therefore, Oswald chose instead to create a kin network by marrying a woman from the Bernician royal family to one of Eadbald's sons. Eadbald chose his eldest son, Eormenred, for the reconnection of kinship to northern England. Because Oswald was slain in battle at *Maserfelth* in 642 by Penda, and Eadbald died in 640, this indicates that Eormenred's marriage to Oslafa must have taken place no later than 640.

Depending on when this marriage between Northumbria and Kent occurred, Eadbald and Oswald may have both been attempting to bolster their reigns. Eadbald had had trouble securing the prestige of his father Æthelberht since the beginning of his reign, and during his rule, Kentish influence in the southeast had contracted.[621] Oswald, despite recently regaining his kingdom, had inherited a combined Northumbria through his kinship to both Bernicia and Deira and had the military backing for continued success. Oswald likely wanted connections to a wealthy kingdom which shared familial and trade networks with Francia, while Eadbald wished for powerful kin who could potentially assist Kent in withstanding Mercian expansionary efforts. By marrying his son Eormenred to Oswald's relative Oslafa, Eadbald

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[619] Bede, *HE* iii.7 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 232–33).
[620] Bede, *HE* v.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 564–65). For Æthelburh's founding of Lyminge, see: *VSW*, ch. 1 (ed. Love, 28–9); *Vita Mildburgae*, ch. 2. This text still needs to be edited, but a summary can be found in: Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 80.
[621] Bede, *HE* ii.6 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 154–57). Also, see chapter two.

ensured both rulers gained what they sought: an alliance for mutual benefit. However, Eadbald made certain that Oswald's familial connection to Kent was centred on a non-ruling branch of the Kentish royal family.

If we account for the highly competitive and ruthless nature of Northumbrian succession politics, it may be possible that Eadbald in marrying Oswald's kin to a non-ruling branch of the Kentish royal family was guarding Kentish succession. According to the earliest text in the *Mildrith Legend*, Eadlbald had passed over Eormenred, the eldest son, during the Kentish succession in favour of Eorcenberht, the younger and more favoured son.[622] We are told Eormenred would live powerless and die early for unknown reasons leaving his two young sons, Æthelred and Æthelberht, as orphans. What became of Oslafa is unknown. Only her maternal role as mother is listed in the *Mildrith Legend* cycle. The whereabouts of Eormenred's daughters, besides Domne Eafe, are also unknown. It could be assumed that, like many of their female relatives, they joined the monastic life on the continent.[623] We do know, however, that Domne Eafe's two young brothers were sent to their cousin, King Egbert of Kent, son of Eorcenberht.[624] They were later murdered at Egbert's court, either by Egbert's command or not, the sources are not cohesive on this point.[625] These orphaned sons are the basis of the *Passio beatorum martyum Ethelredi atque Ethelbricti*, one of the texts composing the *Mildrith Legend*.[626] Their eventual murder is part of the foundation story for Minster-in-Thanet, which was established by Domne Eafe, their older sister and the wife of Merewalh.

Little can be said about Eormenred and Oslafa's marriage beyond this brief accounting. However, I have been able to estimate that their marriage took place sometime between 634 and 640, if we can assume that Oslafa was Bernician. If this was the case, their marriage likely acted as a reaffirmation of familial ties between Northumbria and Kent. These ties may have supported the individual goals and reigns for both Oswald and Eadbald. But, Eadbald ensured that Kentish succession would remain within the Kentish royal family by creating this familial tie with a son not slotted for the throne. So why would the Mercian royal family marry one of the daughters from this match? The answer may lie in the vicissitudes of early English succession. First, I must explain the children of Eadbald's other son, Eorcenberht.

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[622] Rollson, *Mildrith Legend*, 73–4.
[623] Bede, *HE* iii.8 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 236–41).
[624] Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 94.
[625] A portion of the texts in the *Mildrith Legend* state their murder was called for by Egbert after being influenced by one of his men named Thunor. Other texts lay all blame on Thunor. See: Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 73–87.
[626] Ibid., 89–104.

Eorcenberht and Seaxburh

After Eadbald's death in 640, his son Eorcenberht (r. 640–664) succeeded to the throne and married Seaxburh, the daughter of King Anna of East Anglia.[627] Not much is known concerning Eorcenberht's reign.[628] However, Seaxburh and Eorcenberht produced four children that would live into adulthood. Their two sons, Egbert and Hlothhere, would both succeed to the Kentish throne in turn.[629] And their two daughters, Eormenhild and Eorcengota, would both end their lives as abbesses.[630] Seaxburh remained in Kent after her husband's death in 664, and according to her *vita*, she was regent for a time until Egbert came of age.[631] Whether she was actually a regent for her son cannot be ascertained because Bede never mentions regency in the *HE*, nor do other sources confirm this detail. After her time as regent ended, her *vita* claims she joined the monastic life in Kent at an estate called Milton, which does have archaeological evidence for a large pre-Conquest church.[632] Seaxburh later succeeded her sister Æthelthryth as abbess at Ely, and Eormenhild would later appear at the East Anglian monastery to succeed her mother.[633] Previous to her entry to Ely, Eormenhild had been married to Wulfhere.[634]

Using the earliest possible dates for Egbert's reign and Eormenhild's marriage to Wulfhere, we can attempt a date range for the marriage between Seaxburh and Eorcenberht. First, Egbert succeeded his father, Eorcenberht, in 664. If we assume he had reached majority, somewhere between seventeen and twenty-one years of age, when he succeed, thus not requiring a regent, this will give us a birth year between 643 and 647.[635] This indicates we can push the earliest possible date of marriage for Seaxburh and Eorcenberht to 642. But no source elucidates the birth order of Seaxburh's children, so it is entirely plausible that Egbert was not of age. Thus, the *VSeax*'s claims for Seaxburh's time as regent may be accurate. This, however, does not give us a range for Seaxburh and

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[627] Bede, *HE* v.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 564–65).
[628] For a brief overview, see: Susan Kelly, "Eorcenberht (d. 664), king of Kent," in *ODNB* (23 Sep. 2004), accessed 27 Feb. 2024, https://www-oxforddnb-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/.
[629] Bede, *HE* iv.1 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 328–29) and iv.5 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 352–53).
[630] Eorcengota, the eldest daughter, was sent at a young age to Francia where she later became an abbess for the monastic establishment at Brie. She was sainted after her death: Bede, *HE* iii.8 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 263–41). Eormenhild would later join her mother, Seaxburh, at the monastery at Ely.
[631] *VSeax*, ch. 7 (ed. Love, 148–9).
[632] *VSeax*, ch. 8 (ed. Love, 150–151, also see n. 5). She would later construct the monastery of Minster-in-Sheppey near this estate. See: *VSeax*, ch. 10 and 11 (ed. Love, 156–59).
[633] Bede, *HE* iv.19 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 392–93); *VSeax*, ch. 19 and 20 (ed. Love, 170–73).
[634] *Lectiones in Natale Sancte Eormenhilde*, ch. 2 (ed. Love, 12–3) and ch. 6 (ed. Love, 16–7).
[635] David Dumville states age of succession was one where a son could bear arms in battle. This is quite dependent upon the maturity of the son which is reached based on the individual. We could assume a variable age range of seventeen to twenty-one. See: Dumville, "The ætheling," 3.

Eorcenberht's marriage. Therefore, looking at Eormenhild's marriage to Wulfhere could offer a clearer timeframe than Egbert's succession. Wulfhere acceded to the Mercian throne sometime in 658 after three of his *comes* staged a rebellion against Oswiu and restored him to his birthright.[636] With 658 being the earliest Eormenhild could marry Wulfhere, if we account for a marriageable age, this will solidly place Eorcenberht and Seaxburh's marriage between 641 and 645. This dating assumes Eormenhild's age in 658 is between twelve or sixteen, although she could have been older. With these speculative age ranges for two of Eorcenberht and Seaxburh's children, it alludes to a marriage occurring sometime around the beginning of Eorcenberht's reign (640/1) to 645/6 at the latest. A marriage at the beginning of Eorcenberht's reign follows the nascent picture for marriage patterns explored thus far, further confirming my estimate.

Both Eorcenberht and Eormenred's marriages illustrate a shift from cross channel Frankish connections to insular, prestigious matches. Previously, Kentish kings had preferred to marry Frankish elite women to maintain kinship ties. Æthelberht's marriage to Bertha is the best documented case, while Eadbald's union with Ymme is lesser known but recorded in the *Mildrith Legend*.[637] Despite a theory suggesting both marriages show a Frankish hegemony over southern England, it is more likely these familial ties were for maintaining trade and travel connections.[638]

The shift to insular matches may indicate Kent's precarious involvement in early pre-Conquest politics. As I discussed above, Eormenred's match with Oslafa was a continuation of relations with Northumbria begun by Edwin's marriage to Æthelburh. Eorcenberht's marriage to Seaxburh, however, may illustrate a shift to create familial ties with a powerful kingdom better able to assist Kent: a marriage alliance for mutual benefit. As a major kingdom capable of withstanding Mercian aggression, maintaining East Anglian relations was crucial. Furthermore, East Anglia was wealthy, showcased by the Sutton Hoo elite burial mounds, and with excavations at the royal *vill* of Rendlesham unearthing evidence of continental trade on level with Kent.[639] For these reasons, Anna's daughters were highly sought after but only two

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[636] See chapter two.
[637] Bede, *HE* i.25 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 72–75); Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 75–86.
[638] Ian Wood argued both Æthelberht and Eadbald's marriages to Kentish princesses provides evidence for Frankish overlordship. However, Francia was a massive kingdom constituted of multiple kingdoms with many rulers, much like early pre-Conquest England. It is far more likely that Kent was interested in fostering relations, both friendly and biological, for the purpose of trade, evidenced by the richness of the small southerly kingdom, and later, supporting safer travel. See: Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450–751* (London: Longman Group, 1994), 176–79; Irene Bavuso, "Balance of power across the Channel: reassessing Frankish hegemony in southern England (sixth-early seventh century)," *EME* 29, no. 3 (2021): 283–304.
[639] See: Martin Carver, *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); Christopher Scull, Faye Minter and Judith Plouviez, "Social and economic complexity in early medieval England: a central place complex of the East Anglian kingdom at Rendlesham, Suffolk," *Antiquity* 90, no. 354 (2016): 1594–1612; Georgina Pitt, "The enigmatic Sutton Hoo ship-burial: Fresh insights from assemblage

daughters were married, Seaxburh and Æthelthryth.[640] Anna's other daughters, Sæthryth, Æthelburh, and possibly Wihtburh, had all joined the monastic life as youths.[641] Anna may have sought familial connections with Kent to not only increase economic prosperity, but also gain prestigious religious connections. What leads me to suspect a religious aspect to this marriage, is Eorcenberht's pairing with Seaxburh is described as almost inevitable because Eorcenberht was Æthelberht's grandson.[642] A match between two prestigious, Christian royal children. One must be careful, however, when attributing marriage to religious zeal because our sources derive from ecclesiastics who champion the inevitability of Christianity's rise. It is best practice to proceed with caution, but we should not discount entirely the religiosity of the newly converted. Regardless, there are definitely multiple factors beneath each elite marriage because it is a union contracted between kingdoms and not individuals.

Important to this section, is that Seaxburh and Eorcenberht were the parents of Eormenhild, Wulfhere's wife. While not much evidence survives for Seaxburh's time as Eorcenberht's wife, her activity as abbess at Minster-in-Sheppey and Ely are better attested. Because we can tentatively date their marriage to between 640/1 and 645/6, this marriage was contracted just a few years after Eormenred and Oslafa's marriage. This dating may indicate Northumbrian influence in this match. We are unaware of Oswald's connections to East Anglia, but his brother and successor, Oswiu, certainly had influence in the East Anglian court.[643] When this influence began is unknown, but we certainly known Oswiu was willing to manipulate socio-cultural systems to achieve his long-term aims. It is entirely possible that Kent and East Anglia contracted this marriage without Northumbrian influence, but I do not believe this is the case. The kingdoms of East Anglia, Kent and Northumbria may have been in league to contain Penda's Mercian expansion. If Northumbria was behind Eorcenberht and Seaxburh's marriage, we are once again left with questions surrounding Mercia's intent behind the two marriages to Kentish cousins.

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theory," *Parergon* 36, no. 1 (2019): 1–29, https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.293419103219462.

[640] Athelthryth's first match with an important ealdorman of the South Gyrwe, a small political unit in the Fens, was short-lived because he died a few months after the marriage. She was later married to Ecgberht, king of Northumbria, but she was much older than her husband which indicates that the match was for prestige. Ecgberht, considered a weaker king than his father, Oswiu, needed an elite marriage to assist his image. See: Bede, *HE* iv.19 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 390–93).

[641] Bede, *HE* iii.8 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 238–39); *SWiht*, proem (ed. Love, 54–55).

[642] *VSeax*, ch.2 (ed. Love, 140–1).

[643] Bede, *HE* iii.22 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 284–85).

Merewalh and Domne Eafe

The date, and underlying causes of Merewalh and Domne Eafe's marriage are unknown. There are, however, a few pieces of information that could help form a better picture of when, and possibly why Mercia would want this match. First, Domne Eafe appears to be Merewalh's second marriage indicating his first wife was either dismissed, or had died (i.e. childbirth, disease, etc.).[644] Second, it appears the couple had already dissolved their marriage to join religious communities prior to Domne Eafe's recall to Kent from Mercia to accept *wergild* on behalf of her murdered brothers.[645] Her acceptance of *wergild* transpired sometime during Egbert's reign (664–673). Additionally, by the time they separated, Domne Eafe had birthed four children: Mildrith, Mildburh, Mildgith and Merefin, with Mildburh being the eldest daughter. With these few snippets of information, it might be possible to estimate a timeframe for Domne Eafe and Merewalh's marriage.

To begin determining the possible date for Domne Eafe and Merewalh's marriage, I must first begin with the evidence for Merewalh's previous union.[646] This will help to give a general timeframe, while also elucidating a bit about Merewalh's previous marriage; thus, explaining curious land grants pertinent to chapter four. The information for Merewalh's first match is alluded to in *Mildburg's Testament*, which was purportedly written by Mildburh herself and later preserved by Goscelin while writing the *Vita Mildburgae*.[647] In this text, Mildburh informs us she had received multiple properties from *fratrum meorum Merchelmi regis et Milfridi*.[648] The familial ties to Mildburh and her two brothers, Merchelm and Mildfrith, are expressed only in this document. At the time of this grant, it can be assumed they had succeeded their father because they are both styled as *rex* with their uncle Æthelred's confirmation. The *Mildrith Legend*, the sole tradition that records Merewalh's existence, never lists the two brothers, instead it details Merefin, Merewalh and Domne Eafe's only known son.[649] Merefin unfortunately died as an infant, so he cannot be identified with either Merchelm nor Mildfrith. This disparity signifies that Mildburh, Merchelm and Mildfrith, had shared paternity but not maternity. Following the emerging pattern shown by other Mercian matches discussed in this chapter, Merewalh may have married Merchelm and Mildfrith's

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[644] Charter S 1799 has Mildburh receiving a grant of land from her brothers, Merchelm and Mildfrith, at some point between c.674 and c.704. This charter can be found in the text of *St. Mildburg's Testament*, edited by Finberg. See: Finberg, *ECWM*, 202–3. I discuss this more in chapter five.
[645] Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 93.
[646] See chapter two.
[647] Finberg briefly examined, edited and translated this document. See: Finberg, *ECWM*, 197–216. I also discuss this in chapter two and five.
[648] Finberg, *ECWM*, 202.
[649] Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 93.

mother close to the end of Penda's reign (between 650 and 655) when he received rule over the Magonsæte. It is possible their union took place around the same time as Cyneburh and Peada's marriages to Oswiu's children, discussed in a previous section. The placement of Merewalh's kingdom on the western fringes of Mercia's core lands may indicate this unnamed woman had Welsh-Brittonic connections, potentially much like Merewalh's own mother.[650] Either way, these Brittonic connections and timeframe are indicative of previous marriage strategies on the part of the Mercian royal family, and it raises some issues concerning the events directly after Penda's death.

To understand the marriage strategies during Wulfhere's reign, I must now shift to the events directly after Penda's death to illustrate potential scenarios surrounding the marriage with which this section is concerned. We are unaware of what happened to Merewalh during Oswiu's overlordship of Mercia from 655 to 658. I speculated in chapter two that Merewalh retained control of the Magonsætan kingdom. This would have been possible in two different ways. One, he could have resisted Oswiu's forces. If this is the case, Merewalh as one of the elder brothers[651] would have had greater success staving off Northumbrian attempts at domination. Thus, his kingdom could be where, Wulfhere and Æthelred, fled to with the Mercian ealdormen after Penda's defeat.[652] The second possibility is that Merewalh sided with Oswiu, much like Peada, after *Winwæd*. If I am correct in assuming Oslafa's Bernician origins, then Domne Eafe's marriage to Merewalh may have either been part of Oswiu's orchestrations, or as means to create familial ties with Merewalh. Oswiu may have enlisted his kinswoman Oslafa's assistance to ensure the marriage proceeded. As shown in the *HF*, elite women did participate in the marriage process of their daughters.[653] In either scenario, what happened to Merewalh's first partner is a mystery, but if she had died, as I suspect, Merewalh would have been seeking a new mother for his two young sons. Regardless of Merewalh's role in 655, by the time Wulfhere came to power, he was on good terms with his brothers. Therefore, it may be possible that both presented scenarios were the case. Merewalh may

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[650] I speculated on Merewalh's mother in chapter two.

[651] If Brooks' argument is accounted for, Penda was fifty when he died in 655. This gives us a birthdate of around 605, indicating he was around twenty-one when he succeeded in 626. This aligns with the other ages of Penda's sons when they began ruling in their (sub)kingdoms. If Penda's first partner conceived shortly after their union, assuming, like his sons, he partnered with someone after ascending the throne, Merewalh could have been born sometime around 630. This would give us a succession date for Merewalh around 650/1. This estimation also aligns with the above charter evidence (S 1798), whose earliest possible date is 675 because Æthelred confirms the grant. Merchelm and Mildfrith would have been in their early twenties if we assume this earliest dating for this charter. Of course, this all involves a healthy amount of supposition and these dates can only ever be an estimate. See: Brooks, "The formation of the Mercian kingdom," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 166.

[652] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 294–95).

[653] A famous example is Fredegund's personally funded additional dowry for her daughter Rigunth's marriage. See: Gregory of Tours, *HF* vi.45 (ed. Krusch and Levison, 317–19).

have accepted a new marriage to Domne Eafe, who had Northumbrian ties, sometime in the years around 655 either by his father, his own, or Oswiu's instigation.

After detailing these earlier events, I argue that Domne Eafe married Merewalh sometime around 655. A marriage date of around 655 would account for the estimation of Domne Eafe's parents' marriage sometime between 634 to 640. Additionally, this date would also accommodate Merewalh's previous marriage, possibly with a woman of Welsh-Brittonic descent, and the two sons born from this union. It cannot be determined, however, who was responsible for offering Merewalh this marriage. Was it his father Penda, Merewalh himself (like his brother Peada), or Oswiu's influence (again similar to Peada)? We will never know for certain. However, we can be fairly certain of events after Domne Eafe's separation from Merewalh. Despite heavy Christian overtones, it is probable they did separate to join a religious life.[654] This would have likely occurred sometime close to 664 — the beginning of Egbert's reign — because they had already been separated for a span of time when Egbert requested that Domne Eafe return to Kent.[655] Domne Eafe would found Minster-in-Thanet on the lands she received as *wergild* for her brothers, with her daughter Mildrith later joining her. Merewalh is listed as being buried at Repton, a royal burial site for the Mercian family.[656] Merchelm and Mildfrith would succeed their father, but after this, sources for the Magonscætan become quiet beyond a brief mention of Magonscætan territory in a later charter.[657]

Eormenhild and Wulfhere

I now move to the last known marriage between Kent and Mercia during the seventh century. Up to this point, I have described familial connections of the Kentish royal family members that would eventually marry Merewalh and Wulfhere. Exploring these previous marriages has given me an estimated timeline for the Mercian marriages that happened later. Determining Eormenhild and Wulfhere's marriage date is a bit easier than previous matches. Furthermore, sources for Wulfhere's reign are more plentiful than the other marriages with Kent. This fact helps better illuminate political factors behind their marriage.

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[654] I will discuss this separation and the founding of Minster-in-Thanet in chapter four.
[655] Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 93.
[656] Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 81. Repton is also the resting place of Æthelbald: ASC A 755 (ed. Bately, 37). For more see: Rollason, "saints' resting-places," 66.
[657] The Magonscætan are mentioned in S 677 (*in pago Magescætna*). See: Kelly, ed., *Charters of Bath and Wells*, 214–20.

The length of Eormenhild and Wulfhere's marriage is known if we follow Eormenhild's *lectiones*, which state the couple was married for seventeen years.[658] On casual glance, this could be an elision with the length of Wulfhere's reign, which was also seventeen years. This obviously may be an intentional falsification on Goscelin's part, the composer of the *lectiones*, either through his assuming the length of their marriage, or an attempt to make their union appear longer for aesthetic reasons. However, as I mentioned in the introduction, Goscelin was a hagiographer not prone to embellishment. He likely could have had access to information no longer extant. Politically it was in Wulfhere's best interest as a young ruler to quickly find a suitable bride, and this also follows the emerging pattern seen in this chapter. He had just regained the Mercian kingdom from Oswiu in a rebellion and had to establish himself as the Mercian overlord.[659] Wulfhere had the backing of the Mercian elite and a marriage to an appropriate elite women happened fairly quickly after gaining a kingdom. Therefore, Goscelin's claim for a seventeen-year marriage may be correct. This may be further confirmed by Wulfhere and Eormenhild's daughter, Wærburh, who seems to have been older at the time of Wulfhere's death.[660] After her father's death, she was recalled to Mercia, having spent time at Ely, by her uncle Æthelred and received three monastic estates as abbess.[661] All this indicates Wulfhere and Eormenhild were married from 658 to 675, when Wulfhere died in circumstances unknown.[662] This certainly gives us the timeframe for their marriage, but it fails to illuminate the deeper factors behind this union.

Political motives behind Wulfhere's marriage to Eormenhild may centre around Domne Eafe's match with Merewalh and Mercian resentment toward Northumbria. Oswiu's control of Mercia and some of its constituent kingdoms (Middle Anglia), while only spanning three years, had been preceded by treachery. His children may or may not have been involved with his plot, but the disappearance of his son, nephew and daughter may indicate that even if they were involved, they (eventually) did not approve.[663] We are aware that Cyneburh later established a monastic community at Castor, but after the Synod of Whitby in 664, her husband Alhfrith vanishes from the archive.[664] Peada was murdered at the Easter celebration, supposedly by his wife Alhflæd, but she may have been a convenient scapegoat.[665] I discussed these cases at length in the above section, but Northumbria seems to have used both

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[658] *Lectiones in Natale Sancte Eormenhilde*, ch. 6 (ed. Love, 16–7).
[659] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (Ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 294–95).
[660] *VWær*, ch. 2–4 (ed. Love, 34–37).
[661] *VWær*, ch. 5 (ed. Love, 38–41).
[662] Bede, *HE* v.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 564–65); *ASC* A 675 (ed. Bately, 31).
[663] See above.
[664] Alhfrith appears at the Synod in both the *HE* and *VW*. See: Bede, *HE* iii.25 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 296–97); *VW* ch. 10 (ed. Colgrave, 20–21). I discuss Alhfrith's involvement at Whitby in chapter four, and Cyneburh's monastery at Castor in chapter four.
[665] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (Ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 294–95).

matches against Penda and Mercia fell under Northumbrian control. With Wulfhere's marriage to Eormenhild transpiring in 658, it is completely understandable that a Northumbrian match would be unacceptable.

With a Northumbrian elite woman out of the running as Wulfhere's wife, this is where the timing of Domne Eafe's marriage to Merewalh becomes crucial. If we can assume Merewalh was already married to Domne Eafe in 658, this may indicate Wulfhere already had sights on making a Kentish match. Even if Merewalh was not married yet in 658, Wulfhere may have already shifted his gaze to Kent. Penda had begun expansion into the territories of Middle Anglia and the West Saxons, and Wulfhere aspired to continue this expansion of the Mercian hegemony. He may have sought marriage with Eormenhild for not only her connections to Kent, but also East Anglia. Having these familial connections to both Kent and East Anglia meant he could focus his endeavours elsewhere. Domne Eafe already provided connections to Kent, but hers was a non-ruling line and her matriline connections were likely Northumbrian. On the other hand, Eormenhild was a daughter of the current king, Eorcenberht, and her matrilineal connections were to the East Anglian ruling family. If Merewalh had already married Domne Eafe, marriage to Eormenhild would have solidified Kentish familial connections and created an additional familial network to the East Anglian royal family.

If Merewalh had not married Domne Eafe by 658, evidence may indicate something bigger was afoot, and there are further implications that the two marriages were certainly a political strategy on the part of the Mercian royal family. The *lectiones* of Eormenhild claim that after her marriage to Wulfhere, Kent and Mercia were made one kingdom.[666] There has been some confusion on this statement because it does not appear in other versions, nor are earlier sources forthcoming on Mercian and Kentish relations at this date. Rosalind Love suspects it might be derived from some form of *Þa halgan*, which is suspected to have been one of Goscelin's sources.[667] But she does mention that allusion to the joining of Kent and Mercia does not appear in any other extant OE or Latin version. The language of this line, *facti sunt uti unum regnum*, is evocative of *Ephesians* 5:31, *erunt duo in carne una*.[668] However, instead of marriage between two partners, it has turned into marriage between two kingdoms.

While not necessarily suggesting that Mercia claimed *imperium* over Kent through this marriage, it could describe subsequent familial connection possibly in the form of children. It is

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[666] *Lectiones in natale sancte Eormenhilde*, ch. 2 (ed. Love, 12–3).
[667] Love, ed., *Hagiography of Female Saints*, xxvi–xxxxii and 13, n.5.
[668] For more on Ephesians influence on medieval marriage, see: Philip Reynolds, *How Marriage Became One of the Sacraments: The Sacramental Theology of Marriage from Its Medieval Origins to the Council of Trent* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016), 62–68.

odd that Domne Eafe and Eormenhild were from both ruling branches of the Kentish royal family. If both marriages took place in 658, it could be that Wulfhere was hedging his bets by ensuring relation to both ruling branches. He may have hoped for a chance to claim *imperium* over Kent through their children, much like the situation between Bernicia and Deira.[669] It would certainly explain Æthelred's attack on Kent in 676.[670] By this date, both unions had dissolved either through separation or death. Eormenhild, instead of returning to Kent, entered the monastery of Ely in East Anglia to be with her mother.[671] It appears Eormenhild had fostered her East Anglian connections instead of Kentish ones. Domne Eafe had returned to Kent and founded Minster-in-Thanet and she maintained her Mercian and Kentish relationships.[672] However, she was now resident in her natal kingdom and separated from Mercia. Additionally, all children produced by both marriages had joined religious communities. Thus, Æthelred realised he would have to gain control of Kent through a military venture to complete his family's vision.

By following these four marriages, two of which were to the Mercian royal family, I have shown the complex web of relations between not only Mercia and Kent, but also Kent's connections. The matches made prior to Merewalh and Wulfhere illustrated that Mercia likely contracted these marriages to Kent with an eye toward their wifes' matrilineal networks. The Kentish royal family had certainly obtained prestigious marriages, some with Francia and others with the East Anglian, and possibly, Northumbrian royal families. Depending on when Merewalh's marriage to Domne Eafe occurred, which may have taken place sometime around 655 and 658, there are two scenarios present. In one, Domne Eafe acted as mediator or as influencer for Wulfhere's match with her cousin Eormenhild under the direction of Oswiu: a scenario with little supporting evidence. In the other and more likely suggestion, both marriages between Merewalh and Domne Eafe, and Eormenhild and Wulfhere, transpired concurrently. This scenario may have evidence which supports this claim. If this was the case, Wulfhere planned to create familial ties to a kingdom he had intentions of expanding into. Any children born from these two unions would have had biological connection to the Kentish throne, thus creating an opportunity for succession. However, the plan ultimately failed through the zeal of the converted. Nevertheless, the Mercian royal family eventually succeeded in expanding their influence into Kent during Æthelred's reign, not through matrilineal lines but rather through force.

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[669] See chapter two and four.
[670] Bede, *HE* iv.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 368–69); *ASC* A 676 (ed. Bately, 31)
[671] *Lectiones in natale sancta Eormenhilde*, ch. 6 (ed. Love, 16-19).
[672] This is explored in chapter four.

3.3.2 – Mercia and the East Saxons: Evidence for Familial Relations?

With the marriages between the royal families of Mercia and Kent explained, I now move to another marriage which seems to be part of the same Mercian strategy of expansion which mobilised networks of women instead of violence. To explore these marriages, I must look at a later *vita* which details two marriages connected to this Mercian strategy: the *vita* of St. Osyth. Much ink has been spilt over Osyth's collection of *vitae* because of the tradition's apparent conflation and garbled retelling of multiple saints.[673] Two arguments have emerged from the body of literature concerned with Osyth's *vitae*. Some regard the confusion found within the texts as evidence for two separate individuals by the name Osyth, one a saint at Aylesbury and the other at Chich.[674] This separation is based on two factors: the dismissal of a supposed translation of Osyth's body from Chich to Aylesbury with its subsequent return, and the appearance of contradictory feast dates, one marked 7 October and the other 3 June. However, after examining historical versus hagiographical indicators, some have questioned this separation and concluded that there may have indeed been one Osyth, and not two.[675] In this thesis, I follow that there was a single Osyth.[676] I do not dismiss that conflation with other saints occurred, but I attribute some of the more fantastical elements of the hagiographic tradition to later embellishment on the part of the compliers.

With this said, I will begin by detailing the elements of Osyth's *vitae* showing signs of being accurate accounts of seventh-century events which detail familial connections, and marriage. In the reconstructed *vita*, we learn that Osyth's parents were King Frithuwald and Queen Wilburh, a daughter of Penda.[677] Osyth's birthplace is given as Quarrendon, but the date is not specified. She later joined her maternal aunts Eadgyth and Eadburh at their

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[673] For more, see: Christopher Hohler, "St. Osyth and Aylesbury," *Records of Buckinghamshire* 18 (1966–70): 61–72; David Bethell, "The Lives of St. Osyth of Essex and St. Osyth of Aylesbury," *Analecta Bollandiana* 88 (1970): 75–127; R.P. Hagerty, "The Buckinghamshire Saints Reconsidered 2: St. Osyth & St. Edith of Aylesbury," *Records of Buckinghamshire* 29 (1987): 125–32; Keith Bailey, "Osyth, Frithuwold and Aylesbury," *Records of Buckinghamshire* 31 (1990): 37–48; Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, 134–39; Bassett, "Offa, King of the East Saxons," 6–8; Andrew Sargent, "A Misplaced Miracle: The Origins of St Modwynn or Burton and St Eadgyth of Polesworth," *Midland History* 41, no. 1 (2016): 1–19.

[674] Hohler was first to propose this, and many have followed this principle. Additionally, Bethell organised his reconstruction of Osyth's *vitae* around this thought. See: Hohler, "St. Osyth and Aylesbury"; Bethell, "Lives of St. Osyth".

[675] John Blair acknowledges this lack of determinability for Osyth. See: Hagerty, "Buckinghamshire Saints Reconsidered"; Bailey, "Osyth, Frithuwold"; John Blair, "A Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Saints," in *Local Saints and Local Churches*, ed. Thacker and Sharpe, 549.

[676] There are some that attribute Osyth with the Hwiccan royal family instead of a Mercian one. This is based on naming patterns, later charter evidence, and the *History of Evesham*. It also assumes that Osyth was not the mother of Offa because she remained virgin. I take her virginal status to be a hagiographical convention. Therefore, she very well could be Offa's mother. See: Finberg, *ECWM*, 182–3; Bassett, "Offa, King of the East Saxons," 20. For an example of later hagiographical tinkering, see: Frank Stenton, "St. Frideswide and her Times," in *Preparatory*, ed. D. Stenton, 224–33.

[677] The following recounting is found in: Bethell, "Lives of St. Osyth," 80–87.

estates where they were leading a religious life. Whether these aunts were abbesses over monasteries, or they were simply living a chaste life on personal estates is difficult to determine.[678] The mention of nunneries is only in relation to a part which is a blatant confusion with SS Modwenna and the West Saxon Edith.[679] It is more likely that these two Mercian sisters were on personal estates living a chaste life, as will be discussed in chapter four. However, the story goes that Osyth stayed with her maternal aunts so she could learn, until she is recalled by her father for the purpose of marriage.[680] This marriage was to King Sigehere of Essex, whom I have already mentioned. I have reconstructed Osyth's familial connections in image 3.5. The reconstructed *vita* claims that she remained a virgin throughout this marriage, despite Sigehere's attempts to consummate. He would later concede to her wishes of taking the veil and offer Osyth an estate at Chich (Essex) to establish a religious foundation.

To determine if these marriages occurred alongside the marriages to Kent, and therefore, part of the Mercian royal family's strategy, a general timeframe must be established. Fortunately, there are a few details in this sequence of events which can be backed by earlier evidence and can be used for this purpose. Most scholars have identified Frithuwald with the Mercian subking found in charters. I explored Frithuwald's charters and his connection to an extended kingdom running through parts of Surrey, the Thames valley, extending into the Chilterns in chapter two. What could further confirm his administrative landholdings and connection to the Mercian family is the location of Quarrendon within these same territorial bounds and its location within the extended Mercian *imperium*.[681] Additionally, Quarrendon's proximity to Aylesbury (three to four miles) may indicate this royal estate was either given to him or was part of his wife's landholdings because Aylesbury is associated with Eadgyth.[682] While Frithuwald can only be found in charters dating to Wulfhere's reign, Osyth's potential age at marriage may push his appointment over these lands to Penda's reign. Admittedly the given age of Osyth at the time of her marriage to Sigehere is listed in an Anglo-Norman rendition of the *vita*, which survives in a thirteenth century manuscript.[683] Nevertheless, it states she was able to fend off consummating the marriage because she was thirteen and a half.[684] Sigehere ascended the East Saxon throne around 663/4, and he was already listed as Wulfhere's subking.[685] If we can assume that Osyth was between thirteen

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[678] For more on various devotional methods, see: Sarah Foot, *Veiled Women, Volume I: The Disappearance of Nuns from Anglo-Saxon England* (Abingdon: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), 35–60.
[679] Bethell, "Lives of St. Osyth," 84.
[680] Bede mentions this aspect of early learning for elite girls: Bede, *HE* iii.8 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 236–39).
[681] Blair certainly found Quarrendon's location promising. See: Blair, "Frithuwold's kingdom," 106–7.
[682] I discuss this further in chapter five.
[683] Bethell, "Lives of St. Osyth," 77. Also, see: Jane Zatta, "The Life of St. Osith," *Papers on Language & Literature* 41, no. 3-4 (2005): 339–62.
[684] Bethell, "Lives of St. Osyth," 86.
[685] Bede, *HE* iii.30 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 322–23).

and fourteen at the time of her marriage and that this took place around the time Sigehere succeeded, we get a birthdate of 649 x 651. This signifies that Frithuwald's marriage to Wilburh took place during Penda's reign and this might show Penda had already expanded into this region. Frithuwald, potentially similar to Merewalh, likely retained his political territory through Oswiu's *imperium*.[686]

Osyth, as daughter of a loyal Mercian subking and Penda's daughter, was potentially married to Sigehere for the creation of familial ties to an economically important kingdom. As I mentioned in chapter two, East Anglia seems to have been under constant *imperium* by the larger kingdoms in the area. Wulfhere's expansion into Essex through family is a general trend found in this section. Himself and his brother, Merewalh, had already married into both ruling branches of the Kentish royal family by this time. By marrying his sister Wilburh's daughter to one of the East Saxon kings, he continued this trend of creating familial ties with Mercian marriages to the families of southern kingdoms. He also ensured ready access to the port of London, and if Maddicott's findings are correct, this was crucial for the expanding Mercian salt trade.[687] Mercian familial connections to Essex continued with the birth of Offa, son of Sigehere and likely Osyth despite the *vita*'s claims of virginity.[688]

While the details of Osyth's life are couched in hagiographic language and have been conflated with several saints, her family connections appear accurate. However, her marriage to Sigehere and that of her mother, Wilburh, to Frithuwald, follows a strategic pattern for the Mercian royal family's matches made to southern kingdoms. All of these marriages seem to have been made around the same time, likely Wulfhere's reign, and all seem to have been with elite families where Mercia either already had *imperium* or were seeking *imperium*. The importance of this will become apparent in the next chapter which discusses the location of granted lands to Mercian elite women.

3.4 – Conclusion

By reassessing marriage though a poststructural lens, this chapter has increased our understanding of the political uses of marriage within a Mercian context beyond simply alliance. Elite marriages were certainly contracted to secure alliance between kingdoms, and it would be remiss of me to deny this aspect. However, reaching deeper than the structure of

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[686] Margaret Gelling, *The West Midlands in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1992), 86.
[687] Maddicott, "London and Droitwich".
[688] See footnote 212. Offa shared a close relationship with Mercian king, Cenred, son of Wulfhere and Æthelred's successor. Both Cenred and Offa would later abdicate their thrones. Could this relationship have formed out of Wulfhere's relationship with Sigehere and Osyth's marriage to him? It is possible. See: Bede, *HE* v.19 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 516–17).

alliance theory and interrogating the sources for each marriage individually, illuminates the dark recesses that are silent. Marriages could be used for subversive purposes, such as Oswiu's prolonged plan to undermine and/or end Penda's expansion of the Mercian kingdom. They could also be used to create affinal ties to other kingdoms, thus biologically binding the families together through the subsequent birth of children. This, of course, has been a longstanding view of elite marriage. However, the Mercian royal family appears to have relied heavily on these created familial networks, instead of violence, during the expansion of their *imperium*, especially visible in the south. The Mercian royal family's use of kinship networks in this way is not limited to only marriage, as I demonstrated in chapter two with evidence of Mercian elite men placed in positions of rulership and as administrative agents. Evidence for Mercian family members in administrative positions can also fall into this familial strategy of expansion, and as I shall show in the next chapter, these roles were not exclusively for men.

Furthermore, both elite men and women were important for this Mercian marriage strategy. Both Osyth, Wilburh, and Cyneburh were important individuals to the Mercian family because of their ability to create these matrilineal political networks necessary to Mercian expansion. The marriages made by Peada, Wulfhere, Merewalh, and Æthelred were equally as important. Mercian sons appear to have sought wives upon succeeding to a kingdom whether as subking under their father, or as an independent ruler. They were able to contract their own marriages, for the most part. This certainly appears to be the case for Peada. However, Merewalh may have married his first wife and Domne Eafe at the behest of either Penda or Wulfhere. Whether contracted alone or at the behest of the Mercian overking, elite men and women performed an important political function beyond peaceweaving. Any children produced from these marriages had connections to both kingdoms, and this may have opened different areas of strategy, but always with an eye toward territorial and economic expansion.

Chapter Four –
Elite Women's Lands: Seventh-Century Dynastic Strategies Using Lands Inherited and Granted to the Matrilineal Line

The second half of the seventh century saw an increase in the royal foundation and endowment of monasteries in the kingdom of Mercia and its extended *imperium*. The Mercian elite women of the preceding chapters were considerably involved in this process.[689] The study of early women religious has been fruitful because elite women feature so prominently in the first centuries of the church in early medieval England. Our earliest charter evidence can be traced to the late-seventh century due to the growing use of documentation (such as charters) to prove land-tenure for religious foundations.[690] Additionally, contemporaneous written sources document the arrival of Christianity and the subsequent conversionary period. The following examination is informed by both charters and literary sources. This chapter continues my study of the Mercian networks of women by tracing and locating these monastic lands that were both inherited and granted to the elite women of the Mercian royal family.

Elite widows, former wives, sisters, and daughters often held influential and prominent positions in early English double houses within the burgeoning Church. These double houses were a large part of seventh-century monastic proliferation as well as royal benefaction and were led by abbesses acting as heads of *familia*.[691] In Barbara Yorke's monograph exploring

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[689] This increase can be attributed to several factors. One is that elite families were striving to prove their devotion to the new religion and its God. Another factor was an element of rulership which used Christianity to consolidate the ruling family's sacral power. Lastly, some elite families used monasteries as a means of gaining land-tenure. See: Thacker, "Kings, Saints, and Monasteries"; Barbara Yorke, "The Adaptation of the Anglo-Saxon Royal Courts to Christianity," in *The Cross Goes North*, ed. Carver, 243–57; John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 79–100. For land-tenure see Bede's letter to Ecgbert: *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, OMT, ed. Christopher Grocock and Ian Wood (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2013), 142–51.

[690] As I am not necessarily concerned with the incoming and production of charters for distinct purposes in this chapter beyond a topographical purview, see this small selection of an extensive scholarship: Frank Stenton, *The Latin Charters of the Anglo-Saxon Period* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955; Pierre Chaplais, "The origin and authenticity of the royal Anglo-Saxon diploma," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 3, no. 2 (1965): 48–61 and "Who introduced charters into England? The case for Augustine," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 3, no. 10 (1969): 526–42; Christopher Brooke, "Approaches to medieval forgery," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 3, no. 8 (1968): 377–86; Nicholas Brooks, "Anglo-Saxon charters: the work of the last twenty years," *ASE* 3 (1974): 197–209; Simon Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred 'the Unready' 978–1016: A study in their use as historical evidence* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980; Jonathan Jarrett and Allen McKinley, eds., *Problems and Possibilities of Early medieval Charters* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013). For discussions of 'bookland', see: Patrick Wormald, *Bede and the Conversion of England: the Charter Evidence* (Jarrow: The Jarrow Lecture, 1984) and "*On þa Wæpnedhealfe*: Kingship and Royal Property from Æthelwulf to Edward the Elder," in *Edward the Elder, 899–924*, ed. N.J Higham and D.H. Hill (London: 2001), 264–79; Caty Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils c.650–c.850* (London: Leicester UP, 1995), 69–72; Susan Wood, *The Proprietary Church in Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), ch. 5; Scott T. Smith, *Land and Book: Literature and Land Tenure in Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

[691] For more on the monastic ideal of *familia*, please see: Sarah Foot, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England, c.600–900* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 69–72. The decline of and disappearance of double houses in the ninth century has sparked rigourous debate. Barbara Yorke called into question the assumption that ninth-century invasions were to blame for the decline in female monasteries. She found that familial politics and dynastic strategy was to blame. Later, Sarah Foot, while agreeing with Yorke, concluded that the

the connection of royal houses' to nunneries, it was confirmed that the role of these religious foundations was as both the spiritual and temporal intermediaries for elite families in the ecclesiastical world.[692] Nunneries functioned as religious centres of (intercessory) prayer, burial, commemoration of the dead and in some cases the resting places and shrines of royal saints and associated cult activity. Therefore, elite families had vested interest in female-led monasteries, both for the elite women in residence and in connection with the particular establishments a family chose to patronise.[693] Yorke attributes the early influx of women to Merovingian inspired royal monasteries to two factors beyond zealous faith: protection of a royal dynasty's sacral status and proof of a royal family's devotion to the new faith.[694] Both factors fed into the trend of dedicating young daughters as religious, and to a certain extent, also contributed to the tendency for royal widows and wives to choose a spiritual marriage to Christ over a temporal remarriage.[695]

This chapter extends Yorke's work by considering the secular purpose of Mercian elite women's monasteries and their topographical location. There appears to be patterns in the location of religious foundations. For example, John Blair notes that monasteries were generally founded in areas often dating to either the Roman or pre-Roman periods with strong communications potential due to estuarine or river placement.[696] The locations of these monasteries and their management would have been crucial for movement of both trade goods and men. Yorke highlights identical patterns in female-led monasteries, adding that these locations may also have offered accommodation for royal family visits, which, according

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'disappearance' was illusory. A close examination of extant sources revealed that tenth-century reformers held a restrictive definition of what classified a nunnery. Foot found several female religious who lived outside of this restrictive definition. See: Barbara Yorke, "'Sisters under the skin'? Anglo-Saxon nuns and nunneries in southern England," *Reading Medieval Studies* 15 (1989): 95–117, and later continued in, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* (London: Continuum, 2003); Sarah Foot, *Veiled Women, Volume I: The Disappearance of Nuns from Anglo-Saxon England* and *Veiled Women, Volume II: Female Religious Communities in England, 871–1066* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2000). Julia Crick has also added to this picture of royal patronage: "The Wealth, Patronage, and Connections of Women's Houses in Late Anglo-Saxon England," *Revue Bénédictine* 109, no. 1–2 (1999): 154–85.

[692] Yorke, *Nunneries*.

[693] Some of these conclusions originated from a previous paper, in which she concluded that dynastic struggle was more to blame for the disappearance of the early double houses, and not the presupposed Viking incursions beginning in the ninth century. See: Yorke, "Sisters under the skin," 105-6.

[694] For English double houses being modelled after Merovingian nunneries, see: Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries*, 23–28 and "Queen Balthild's 'monastic policy' and the origins of female religious houses in southern England," *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 20 (2017): 7–16; Blair, *Church*, 42 and n.129. For Yorke's thoughts on female religious: *Nunneries*, 28–30.

[695] Kings were also part of this trend, choosing to "opt out" instead of remaining on the throne. Yorke limited the time frame of kingly abdications to the earliest Christianisation period because abdication to prove faithfulness to the Church was swiftly condemned by members of the Church. Women became the placeholders in this trend. See: Clare Stancliffe, "Kings who Opted Out," in *Ideal and Reality*, 154–76; Yorke, *Nunneries*, 28–30.

[696] Blair, *Churches*, 149–52 and "Minster churches in the landscape," in *Anglo-Saxon Settlements*, ed. Della Hooke (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 35–58.

to later West Saxon sources, declined over time.[697] Early royal itineration did appear to use royally-backed religious foundations as stopping points. Prime examples of this include the monastery of Bardney in Lindsey, a favourite of King Æthelred and Queen Osthryth of Mercia, and the royal *vill* of Lyminge, a portion of which was given to Queen Æthelburh according to the *Mildrith Legend*.[698] Yorke briefly states "that kings [may have] appointed female relatives to nunneries in such places so that they might help supervise".[699] However, she was not able to fully consider the implications of this statement, something which this chapter seeks to unfold.

In this chapter, I re-examine Yorke's theory of intentional appointment of elite women in specific monasteries for a quasi-administrative role. This aligns with my previous discussions concerning Mercian dynastic strategies that utilised maternal connections and networks of women by cataloguing and mapping the lands and estates of Mercian elite women to reveal any potential patterns in their location. In the following sections, I detail each Mercian elite woman's known monastic holdings to determine a possible Mercian origin and the location for each donation. After determining which grant can be associated with the Mercian royal family, I will then map the specific locations (if known). This will visualise where these religious foundations and estates were in relation to the core of the Mercian kingdom, which I laid out in chapter two. A study of this nature has never been attempted for female-led religious foundations during the seventh century, so the following topographical examination will demonstrate that Mercian elite women's particular monastic locations were likely part of a Mercian dynastic strategy.

4.1 – Mercian Elite Women and Their Monastic Lands

Following the death of Penda in 655, the Christianisation of the Mercian royal family accelerated as the Christian faith was often accepted when negotiating marriages with other kingdoms. Examples such as Peada's conversion before his marriage to Ælhflæd shortly after receiving the kingdom of the Middle Angles from his father (c. 653–55) exemplify this

[697] Her evidence relied heavily on West Saxon exemplar. See: Yorke, *Nunneries*, 150–53.
[698] For Bardney, see: Bede, *HE* iii.11 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 246–51). Traditionally, the Æthelburh charged with Lyminge is viewed to be Edwin's widow and sister to Eadbald: *Mildrith Legend*, 62–3. However, Yorke postulates that she is actually King Wihtred's wife, Æthelburh, due to mentions in *Mildrith Legend* originating in later recensions written by Goscelin: *Nunneries*, 23. The connection between a royal *vill* and the monastery at Lyminge has recently been proved archaeologically: Gabor Thomas, "Monasteries and places of power in pre-Viking England: trajectories, relationships and interactions," *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 20 (2017): 97–116.
[699] Yorke, *Nunneries*, 150–51.

trend.[700] The Mercian ruling elite had likely experienced earlier contact with Christians due to their close affiliations with the Western Brittonic kingdoms, which was likely the cause of Penda's liberality towards Christian preaching in Mercia.[701] However, the exploration of Mercia's conversionary period is not the aim of this chapter. Instead, I explore where natal or affinal Mercian elite women joined and/or dwelt in the religious life in youth, after separating from their spouse, or in widowhood. I then examine whether these monasteries were in the charge of a Mercian elite woman as abbess, if gifted lands and estates show evidence of kinship connection, and lastly, map these areas where possible.

Before examining each Mercian elite woman and the lands associated with them, it is important to briefly discuss some issues surrounding early medieval elite women and land ownership, in addition to my methodology for the following sections. First, land ownership in early medieval England is difficult to determine due to the developing ideas concerning land tenure and land ownership.[702] The introduction of charters and the codification of laws in the latter half of the seventh century does little to illuminate previous ideas or customs surrounding this topic. This is especially true for women who appear in these records infrequently, and whose legal status cannot be fully understood. An elite woman's ability to hold land in their own right was readily acknowledged by early scholars.[703] However, this began to change after nuanced studies began appearing, which tied into the debates surrounding the Golden Age and exceptionalism that I discussed in the introduction.[704] Furthermore, there are questions surrounding nascent forms of land ownership in seventh-century England, and for this reason, Yorke rightly questions any claims that women already 'owned' the land on which they founded their monasteries.[705] This view has been impacted by the evidence for women owned lands and estates which comes from much later sources, especially for the early Mercia kingdom.[706] Therefore, the mention of women owned lands could be reflective of later attitudes rather than the lived reality of elite women in the seventh-century. Despite this, I

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[700] Bede, *HE* iii.21 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 278–81). The marriage between Peada and Alhflæd is thoroughly examined in chapter three. For more on the Middle Angles, see: David Dumville, "Essex, Middle Anglia, and the expansion of Mercia in the South-East Midlands," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 123–40.
[701] Bede, *HE*, iii.21 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 280–81).
[702] Land, land tenure, and ownership have been the subject of debate for an extended period, and therefore I will not discuss this. For a small beginning, see: Eric John, *Land Tenure in Early England: A Discussion of Some Problems* (London: Leicester UP, 1960); Wormald, *Bede and the Conversion*, 20–3; Blair, *Church*, 89–90; Wood, *The Proprietary Church*, ch. 5; Smith, *Land and Book*; Thomas Pickles, *Kingship, Society, and the Church in Anglo-Saxon Yorkshire* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), 52–3.
[703] For example: McNamara and Wemple, "The power of women," 126–41; Marc A. Meyer, "Land Charters and the Legal Position of Anglo-Saxon Women," in *The Women of England: From Anglo-Saxon Times to the Present*, ed. Barbara Kanner (London: Mansell Publishing, 1980), 57–82; Fell, *Women in England*, 89–107.
[704] See: Julia Crick, "Women, Wills and Moveable Wealth in Pre-Conquest England," in *Gender and Material Culture in Historical Perspective*, ed. M. Donald and L. Hurcombe (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 17–37
[705] Yorke, *Nunneries*, 32–3.
[706] Here, I reference the copies found in later cartularies, which I discussed in the introduction.

believe that discounting all later evidence of women's land holding might be extreme. Alternatively, just like the marriages and female political action discussed in previous chapters, each case of women's landholding needs to be examined individually and then through the wider contemporaneous and historical context. Unless the evidence proves otherwise, I will treat property associated with Mercian elite women as their own property either gained through familial connections or otherwise.

As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, I have chosen to include women connected through marriage. I have found that, for the most part, elite women of the seventh century had a choice as to which monastery or religious foundation they would reside, and this includes the choice of kingdom. However, this was certainly not the case for every royal woman, as I shall explain shortly. While previous scholars, like Yorke, have acknowledged an elite woman's capacity to choose. Yorke also limits their choice to biological ties only, meaning women could only permanently reside in monasteries geographically located in either kingdoms with patrilineal or matrilineal links.[707] As this chapter demonstrates, this might not necessarily be the case or as limited as prior scholarship has suggested. I consider women's capacity for self-determination, or the lack thereof, dependent upon the woman and her status. Due to the complexity of factors surrounding elite women's land ownership, it is important to examine the geographical placement of their religious foundations and whether the decision was made by a male relative or the woman herself. My first example, Cyneburh, one of Penda's daughters and a former Deiran queen, and her establishment at Castor, will begin to shape this picture of Mercian strategy. I will then move to other Mercian elite women who have extant evidence for grants of land alongside analysing the location of these lands so that I can map them to view any burgeoning picture of possible Mercian strategy.

4.1.1 – Cyneburh and her foundational lands for the Abbey of Castor

Identifying the first Mercian royal woman to join the religious life is difficult because timeframes are never expressed in the sources, but I will begin with Cyneburh, one of Penda's daughters. I have already written extensively about her links to the Northumbrian kingdom of Deira through her marriage to Alhfrith.[708] Beyond singular mention in Bede's *HE* concerning her marriage, sources are sporadic and late, often transmitting divergent information. However, they share common themes and record her saintly status and saint's cult, alongside that of her sister Cyneswith and another female relative, Tibba. Although their associated

[707] Yorke, *Nunneries*, 31–2.
[708] See chapters two and three.

saints' cult still requires scholarly attention, it is not my intention to study this as it is beyond the scope of this chapter. In this section, I am more interested in where she spent the remainder of her life and how she acquired the land for her foundation at Castor. With this aim in mind, I will focus on the sources which allude to her life directly before she became a religious.

For the purpose of exploring her secular life, I now move to later sources which mention Cyneburh and illuminate her life prior to moving to Castor. Two of the earlier sources are *þe Secgan*, a document of pre-Conquest saints' resting places, and the *ASC* E manuscript, thought to originate from Peterborough Abbey.[709] *Đe Secgan* is likely the earliest of the two and shows signs of being compiled in two temporally and geographically distinct sections.[710] This document was entered into London, BL, MS Stowe 944 in or shortly after 1031. However, the latter section of *þe Secgan* possibly dates to sometime in or before 1013, with the first half thought to have been derived from much earlier material.[711] In contrast, the *ASC* E was a twelfth-century copy based on an archetype of manuscripts EF, and maintained by scribes after being lost during the Peterborough fire of 1116.[712] Both *þe Secgan* and *ASC* E treat the translation of Saint Cyneburh's relics to Peterborough Abbey which took place well after her death, around 680.[713]

We have other records which detail her life, but they originate during the twelfth-century, or later. These include: John of Tynemouth's *De sanctis Kyneburga regina et abbastissa, et de Kyneswida et Tibba virginibus* (hereafter *De sanctis Kyneburga*); a spurious charter created sometime during the twelfth century; William of Malmesbury's *GRA*; and lastly, Hugh Candidus's *Peterborough Chronicle*.[714] Despite the lateness of these sources, they provide us

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[709] F. Liebermann, *Die Heiligen Englands. Angelsächsisch und Lateinisch* (Hannover: Hahn'sche Buchhandlung, 1889); David Rollason, "Lists of saints´resting-places in Anglo-Saxon England," *ASE 7* (1978): 61–93; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, vol. 7, MS E*, ed. Susan Irvine (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004).

[710] For a cogent discussion, see: Rollason, "Lists of saints'".

[711] Rollason, "Lists of saints'," 68; Leibermann, *Die Heiligen*, 10–13.

[712] Irvine, ed., *ASE MS E*, xiii and entry for 1116 p. 118–9; Simon Keynes, "Manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*," in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Volume I, c.400–1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), 548–9.

[713] Her death is thought to be c.680, a date shared with the famous Abbess Hild. This makes me a suspicious that this dating is incorrect. However, the translation date is recorded in *ASC* E 963 (ed. Irvine, 57–8), enacted by Ælfsige, which makes this dating more solid. *Đe Secgan* names her resting place as *Burh* another name for Peterborough.

[714] Charter S 68 is a well-recognized, twelfth-century forgery produced at Peterborough. See: Susan Kelly, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Charters 14, Charters of Peterborough Abbey* (Oxford: British Academy, 2009), 131–44; Robin Fleming, "Monastic Lands and England's Defense in the Viking Age," *English Historical Review* 100 (1985): 255, no. 4; Anton Scharer, *Die angelsächsiche Königsurkunde im 7. und 8. Jahrhundert* (Wien: Hermann Böhlaus Nachf, 1982), 143–4; Cyril Hart, *The Early Charters of Northern England and the North Midlands* (London: Leicester UP, 1975), 55, 67, 111, and 117. For the mentioned chroniclers and Tynemouth's collection of *vitae*, see: *The Chronicle of Hugh Candidus, a Monk of Peterborough*, ed. W.T. Mellows and Alexander Bell (London: Oxford UP and Friends of Peterborough Cathedral, 1949); *William of Malmesbury: Gesta regum Anglorum*, vol. 1, ed. R.A.B. Mynors, R.M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998); Carl Horstmann, ed., *Nova Legenda Anglie: As Collected by John of Tynemouth, John Capgrave, and Others, and First Printed, with New Lives, by Wynkyn de Worde*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), 130–32.

with plausible information on Cyneburh's whereabouts after her separation from King Alhfrith, either through annulment or widowhood.

I now consider each of the sources listed above to fill in the details of Cyneburh's secular life beginning with John of Tynemouth's *De sanctis Kyneburga*. Details for her earlier life can be found in this *vita*, which was collected sometime during the mid-fourteenth century by an individual named John of Tynemouth (fl. mid-14th century). This *vita* suffers from confusion in the retelling of Cyneburh's separation from Alhfrith, which first claims that Cyneburh was widowed, followed by a contradictory assertion claiming she, "burned with a desire to renounce herself from her temporal king and kingdom".[715] This confusion on her status as either a widow or divorcee probably stems from several factors. First, John of Tynemouth, a relatively reliable hagiographer who travelled to various ecclesiastical institutions collecting local traditions, likely encountered a dearth of early sources detailing her secular life.[716] Tynemouth may have at first assumed that she was a widow because Bede described Cyneburh's marriage to Alhfrith but did not clarify Alhfrith's end, nor any other detail of her life. Cyneburh could plausibly be a widow if Alhfrith died during the plague of 663/4, or by his father Oswiu's hand due to Alhfrith rebellion.[717] However, William of Malmesbury asserts that, "distaining the bond of the flesh, she took the virtuous cloth".[718] These conflicting explanations may have led to Tynemouth's confusion in the *De sanctis Kyneburga* as to how she was separated from Alhfrith. As John of Tynemouth's construction of the *De sanctis Kyneburga* followed constraints of hagiographic convention, he had to apply a chosen standard because her *vita* was no longer wholly extant. He describes the cause for this disappearance of Cyneburh's *vita* as either having been destroyed by Danes or though

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[715] *temporali regi suo et regno abrenunciare estuabat*: John of Tynemouth, *De sanctis Kyneburga*, 130.

[716] John of Tynemouth was an exhaustive hagiographer who created the *Sanctilogium Angliae, Walliae, Scotiae et Hiberniae* through extensive 'research trips' throughout England and Wales. This extant work was last edited by Horstmann in his *Nova Legenda Anglie*, which is a combined collection of authors. Not much is known of Tynemouth's life, and sadly, there has not been a comprehensive study on his work and the sources he used. However, it has been acknowledged that he leaned heavily on writers such as Bede, Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, and William of Malmesbury, among others. Recently, Virginia Blanton completed an examination of the reliability of Tynemouth's *Sanctilogium* for the purpose of recovering original narratives for women during the conversion period using the examples of Juthwara and Eanswith. She found that Tynemouth was a 'meticulous' hagiographer and that his narratives should be mined as sources for early tradition which has subsequently been lost. For more, see: Horstmann, *NLA*, introduction; M. Lapidge and R.C. Love, "The Latin Hagiography of England and Wales (600–1550)," in *Corpvs Christianorvm Hagiographies*, vol. 3, ed. Guy Philippart (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2001), 305–9; Virginia Blanton, "The Lost and (Not) Found: Sources for Female Saints' Legends in John of Tynemouth's *Sanctilogium*," in *A Companion to British Literature*, ed. R. DeMaria Jr., H. Chang, and S. Zacher (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 65–80.

[717] Alhfrith disappears from records after 664 — when he is recorded at the Synod of Whitby. With plague ravaging Britain around this time, it is possible he died due to the disease. For more on the plague, see: J.R. Maddicott, "Plague in Seventh-Century England," *Past & Present* 156 (1997): 7–54. It is equally as likely that he was killed by his father because of his rebellion. Bede, *HE* iii.14 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 254–55).

[718] *carnali copula fastidita, sanctimonialem habitum suscepit*: William of Malmesbury, *GRA* I.76.2 (ed. Mynors, Thomson and Winterbottom, 110–13).

negligence.[719] As Cyneburh's *vita* was fragmentary and no longer complete, John of Tynemouth may have manufactured a married life similar to other contemporaneous Mercian queens.

Regardless of how the union between Cyneburh and Alhfrith ended, John of Tynemouth recounted Cyneburh's role as founder and abbess over a religious foundation named Castor located on the periphery of the Fens. This location can be viewed in figure 4.1. This gives us a location for her, but it is important to determine if other sources associate Cyneburh with Castor as well. Luckily, this association is confirmed by two earlier sources: the *ASC* E and the *Mildrith Legend*. However, Castor is only one of two places associated with Cyneburh. The *ASC* E entry for 963, describes the translation of the bodies of SS Cyneburh, Cyneswith, and Tibba from both Castor and a place listed as *Rihala* (Tibba's resting place) to Peterborough Abbey during the abbacy of Ælfsige (1006–c. 1041?).[720] This translation to Peterborough Abbey is a common thread between the sources, and as a result, Cyneburh has subsequently been mostly associated with Peterborough rather than Castor.[721]

Due to Castor's proximity to Peterborough Abbey and Cyneburh's association with this monastery, it will be fruitful to examine the beginnings of this foundation to determine if there are underlying factors. Peterborough's foundation has enjoyed extensive scholarship.[722] Sitting in the Fens, Peterborough, known as *Medeshamstede* in pre-Conquest sources, was established in territory belonging to the *Gywre* and lies just five to four miles due east of Castor.[723] As to who controlled the kingdom of the *Gywre*, whether East Anglia or Mercia, depends on the scholar, but by the middle of the seventh century this area was securely under Mercian control as I discussed in chapter two.[724] Mercian *imperium* over this area would explain how Cyneburh came into possession of Castor.

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[719] *In illa Danorum depopulatione fuerunt igne deleta, vel scriptorum negligentia nostra latent secula*: Horstmann, *NLA*, 130.

[720] "…*Þa cæs man oðer abbot of þe silue minstre þe wæs gehaten Ælfsi; se Ælfsi wæs þa abbot syððon fiftig wintre. He nam up Sancta Kyneburh and Sancta Kynesuið þe lægen in Castra and Sancta Tibba þe læi in Rihala and brohte heom to Burch and offrede heom eall Sancte Peter on an dœi…*": *ASC* E 963 (ed. Irvine, 58). Kelly believes that attributing a fifty-year abbacy to Ælfsige is clearly an exaggeration, but the translation of Cyneburh and her kinswomen clearly took place during his time in office. See: Kelly, *Peterborough Abbey*, 115–16.

[721] Cyneburh and her kinswomen's association with Peterborough is listed in the above sources and *þe Secgan*, Hugh Candidus, and the spurious charter S 68.

[722] For more on *Medeshamstede* and the later Peterborough Abbey, see: Ron Baxter, Jackie Hall, and Claudia Marx, eds., *Peterborough and the Soke: Art, Architecture and Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2019); Kelly, *Peterborough Abbey*, 1–119; Avril Margaret Morris, "Forging links with the past: the twelfth-century reconstruction of Anglo-Saxon Peterborough" (PhD diss., University of Leicester, 2006); David Parsons, "The Mercian Church: Archaeology and Topography," in *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon kingdom in Europe*, ed. Michelle Brown and Carol Farr (London: Continuum, 2001), 51–67 Colin Mark Peterson, "Studies in the early history of Peterborough Abbey c.650 – c.1066" (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 1995); Frank Stenton, "Medeshamstede and its Colonies," in *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England Being the Collected Papers of Frank Merry Stenton*, ed. Doris Mary Stenton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 179–192

[723] Bede, *HE* iv.6 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 354–55).

[724] Whitelock believed that the *Gywre* were first under the control of East Anglia, which then shifted to Mercian control based on questions regarding Ely's placement in *Gywre* territory. A more nuanced argument sees the

For this discussion, it is important to note that Cyneburh's brothers — either Peada, Wulfhere and/or Æthelred — were the royal benefactors behind Peterborough Abbey. Therefore, it is necessary to examine which brother may have founded this monastery. The exact date of Peterborough Abbey's establishment is unknown. From Bede we learn that an abbot named Seaxwulf, was consecrated as bishop of the Mercians (672 x 676) after having constructed and acted as abbot of Peterborough Abbey.[725] This indicates that the monastery was founded sometime before 672, but no mention is made of the benefactor who gave the lands to Seaxwulf for this purpose. However, far later twelfth-century sources at Peterborough Abbey detail the founding and also detail the involvement of Cyneburh's brothers. Although it is not clear which brother was responsible. The extent of the brothers' involvement with Peterborough Abbey is unknown, but it is clear the Mercian royal family had close ties to the foundation and its location. Thus, it would be beneficial to explore what the sources say concerning who founded this monastery. This would give us a better timeframe for Peterborough Abbey's foundation and possibly when Cyneburh received Castor.

The underlying motives and royal influences for Peterborough Abbey's establishment are described by Hugh Candidus, William of Malmesbury and in charter evidence, but the details in these sources are as confused as they are for Cyneburh. This makes determining a time frame for Peterborough Abbey's foundation much harder. Hugh Candidus states that Peada, along with his father-in-law, Oswiu, were responsible for its establishment sometime during Peada's brief reign over the Middle Angles (c. 654–56), in whose region the lands of the monastery lay.[726] It is curious that Hugh Candidus would claim that Oswiu was instrumental in the foundation, unless he was accounting for Oswiu's control over Mercia. This foundational story is echoed in a blatantly forged charter (S 68) which claims a date belonging to Wulfhere's reign and further lists Wulfhere's siblings to lend support for this claim.[727] It may be that Hugh Candidus used information found within the charter stating Peada and Oswiu granted the lands to Seaxwulf. Susan Kelly suspects the forged foundational charter was in existence sometime before 1121, placing its fabrication before the composition of his

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Gywre divided into two territories: the North and South *Gywre*. The north territory saw Mercian control while the south territory remained under East Anglian control. This better explains Æthelthryth's marriage to Tondberht, an ealdorman of the *Gwyre*, and the Mercian establishment of Peterborough. See: Dorothy Whitelock, "The pre-Viking age church in East Anglia," *ASE* 1 (1972): 7; Hart, "Tribal Hidage"; Kelly, *Peterborough Abbey*, 3; Susan Oosthuizen, "Culture and identity in the early medieval fenland landscape," *Landscape History* 37, no. 1 (2016): 12 and *The Anglo-Saxon Fenland* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2017), 58–9.

[725] *constructor et abbas monasterii quod dicitur Medeshamstedi in regione Gyruiorum*: Bede, *HE* iv.6 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 354–55). It is thought that Seaxwulf's promotion to Bishop of Mercia occurred between the years 672 to 676: Kelly, *Peterborough Abbey*, 2 and 107–8.

[726] *The Peterborough Chronicle of Hugh Candidus*, ed. and trans. W.T. Mellows (Oxford: Peterborough Museum Society, 1966), 3–4.

[727] For more on post-Conquest forgeries, particularly Peterborough, see: Jennifer Paxton, "Forging Communities: Memory and Identity in Post-Conquest England," *Haskins Society Journal* 10 (2001): 95–109.

chronicle c. 1155–75, making this argument highly plausible.[728] If Oswiu and Peada founded Peterborough Abbey together, this would give us a time frame of sometime between 655 and 656. This extremely short window makes the viability of this scenario questionable, but not completely improbable.

In contrast, William of Malmesbury in the *GRA* credits Wulfhere and Æthelred for founding the monastery, which would give us a later date.[729] William does not go into detail about the foundation and why he attributes it to Wulfhere and Æthelred. His assumption may have derived from a casual glance at S 68, which opens with Wulfhere.[730] The combination of these three sources gives the impression that Peada did indeed grant the foundational lands to Peterborough. If we discount the appearance of Oswiu and assume that a newly converted Peada was solely responsible, this would push the founding date of Peterborough Abbey to sometime between 654 to 656. However, Kelly points to the context in which the charter was fabricated to disprove a donation by Peada. She emphasises that during the twelfth century Peterborough Abbey was attempting to prove *mater ecclesia* status, and therefore, superiority over other regional churches. Attributing the foundation of Peterborough Abbey to Peada established the earlier date clerics sought to support the monastery's claims of *mater ecclesia*.[731] I am far more inclined to believe that Wulfhere and Æthelred, as rulers of Mercia, granted the lands because of the short period which could be attributed to Peada and also the underlying factors of charter S 68. This gives us a timeframe for Peterborough Abbey's foundation as sometime between 658 and 672. This would also be the same period in which Cyneburh would have arrived at Castor.

The peripheral nature of Peterborough Abbey, located on the western edge of the Fens in a subkingdom of Mercia, as well as the timing of the abbey's foundation elicits questions for Cyneburh's foundation at Castor. One of which is the possibility that the lands in this location were already in Cyneburh's possession prior to Wulfhere and Æthelred's founding of Peterborough Abbey. While this remains a possibility, I do not find it probable because *Gywre* lands were not ceded to Mercia until near Peada's placement on the throne of the Middle Angles in 653/4. By the time this event took place, Cyneburh was already wedded to her Northumbrian husband, therefore gifting lands to an already married daughter in a recently acquired subkingdom seems unlikely. The lands of Castor were probably given to Cyneburh by either Wulfhere and/or Æthelred after her separation from Alhfrith because it

[728] Kelly, *Peterborough Abbey*, 135; Morris, "Forging Links with the Past," 108–45.
[729] "Cyneburh, Penda's daughter, became the wife of Aldfrith king of the Northumbrians; but later she wearied of this union in the flesh, and took the nun's habit in a monastery which her brothers Wulfhere and Æthelred had founded.": William of Malmesbury, *GRA* I.76.2. (trans. Mynors, Thomson and Winterbottom, 112–3).
[730] Kelly, *Peterborough Abbey*, 131–44.
[731] Kelly, *Peterborough Abbey*, 8.

has been determined that Wulfhere and Æthelred were likely responsible for the abbey's foundation.

Wulfhere and Æthelred likely gave the lands at Castor to Cyneburh, which raises the question of why they chose Castor. The answer may lie not only in the timing of Peterborough Abbey's foundation, but also the former uses of Castor. As mentioned above, many pre-Conquest ecclesiastical sites were either reused Roman or pre-Roman sites and Castor is no exception. Castor derived its name from the OE term 'cæster' or 'Roman fort' indicative of the nearby Roman fort of *Durorivae*.[732] This former Roman site was situated at an important convergence of Roman roads, which were still crucial to trade and travel in this area.[733] Bell notes that Castor was built over numerous Roman ruins, and a recent archaeological excavation uncovered an assortment of pre-Conquest objects dating between 655 to 680.[734] This is very similar to the timeframe for the arrival of Cyneburh to Castor, and the founding of Peterborough Abbey nearby (658–672). While not definitive evidence, the context of contemporary events (i.e. Cyneburh's marriage and Mercian acquisition of *Gywre* lands), along with artifactual evidence supports Castor having been founded around the timeframe I have established.

With Wulfhere and Æthelred likely the donors of both Peterborough Abbey and Castor, it seems they may have granted this specific site to Cyneburh for the purpose of overseeing the borderland area and their newly founded monastery. A trusted royal family member, both a daughter of Penda and a former queen of Northumbria, who could be trusted to watch over the area and maintain relations with East Anglia. Her foundation at Castor would have made a highly convenient stopping point during royal itineration to the Fens and eastern borderlands of Mercia as a reused Roman site that sat on an important crossroads in the region. The importance of both these crossroads and Peterborough Abbey suggests Cyneburh was given these lands for a purpose: possibly a role as administrative agent in this area. However, this is just one case for a Mercian elite woman's land functioning as more than just a religious foundation. I now move to other Mercian elite women to determine if this is a pattern.

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[732] Tyler Bell, *The Religious Reuse of Roman Structures in Early Medieval England*, BAR 390 (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2005), 203; Kelly, *Peterborough Abbey*, 5.
[733] Christopher Taylor, *Roads and Tracks of Britain* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1979), 64, 120–1, 187–9.
[734] Bell, *Religious Reuse*, 112.

4.1.2 – Domne Eafe at Minster-in-Thanet and her daughter Mildrith

I now turn to Domne Eafe, the Kentish bride of King Merewalh who I discussed at length in chapter three, and who is most famous for her establishment at Minster-in-Thanet, Kent. The foundation date of Minster-in-Thanet is unknown but can be tentatively dated to sometime during King Egbert of Kent's reign (c. 664–673).[735] While this foundation is in Kent, one of Merewalh and Domne Eafe's daughters, Mildrith, would later join her mother at this foundation and after her mother's death become abbess. In addition to the familial connection to the Mercian royal family, later charters connected to Minster-in-Thanet share Mercian elements which show continued maintenance of this kinship connection. For these reasons, I believe exploring the lands at Minster-in-Thanet may be beneficial to understanding aspects of Mercian networks of women and how they operated in kingdoms outside of Mercia. Furthermore, as I discussed in chapter two, Mercia would eventually hold fluctuating levels of *imperium* in Kent during the last quarter of the seventh century. This may intimate that Minster-in-Thanet became important to the Mercian royal family despite originally being founded outside the wider Mercian hegemony.

A brief review of Domne Eafe's Mercian family and discussion of the beginning of Minster-in-Thanet will provide a strong foundation for this section. The daughter of the Kentish Prince Eormenred and Oslafa, Domne Eafe was likely Merewalh's second wife, and I have determined their marriage likely took place sometime after Penda's death in 655 and later dissolved sometime after 664. Domne Eafe and Merewalh dissolved their marriage to join the religious life, but before doing so they produced four children: Mildrith, Mildburh, Mildgith, and Merefin. According to the *Mildrith Legend*, Merefin died in infancy, but all three daughters survived and were dedicated to the Church concurrent to Domne Eafe and Merewalh's abdication.[736] Domne Eafe remained in Mercia but was later recalled to Kent to accept *wergild* for her younger brothers, both of whom had been murdered. This *wergild* consisted of lands which she then used to establish a well-endowed monastery at Minster-in-Thanet. Later, her daughter Mildrith, joined her there and succeeded her mother as abbess. Many sources for the early foundation of Minster-in-Thanet are rooted in the abundant extant hagiographic tradition for Domne Eafe's daughter Mildrith, transmitted via texts comprising the *Mildrith Legend*. Corroborating evidence for both Domne Eafe — appearing as Æbba — and Mildrith can be found in contemporary charters, a rarity for early saints.[737]

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[735] This is based on the dating of the earliest Minster-in-Thanet charter: S 10.
[736] Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 93; *AOELS*, 456–57.
[737] The survival of charters for Minster-in-Thanet has been attributed to its later procurement by St. Augustine's Abbey, see: Kelly, *St Augustine's*, xxv–xxxi and cxii–cxv.

However, because most sources originate from Minster-in-Thanet and in the *Mildrith Legend*, Domne Eafe has been linked primarily to her monastery in Kent, and her natal Kentish family. Her time as a queen and her earliest days as a female religious in Mercia are typically treated as secondary information. This is evident in scholarship on Minster-in-Thanet, which focuses on Kentish connections rather than Mercian.[738] The elision of Domne Eafe and Mildrith's Mercian connections with Kentish ones is grounded in ideas that affinal connections were both viewed as temporary and subsidiary to biological connections, which I discussed in the introduction of this thesis. This outlook is partly coloured by early law codes which have, "…a married woman [remaining] primarily the responsibility of her paternal kin"; and therefore, Domne Eafe would have been required to return to her paternal kin in Kent upon conclusion of the marriage.[739] As I have mentioned above, this might not necessarily be the case. Focusing on Domne Eafe, her daughter Mildrith and Minster-in-Thanet sheds new light on the monastery's little studied Mercian connections, and the assumption that Domne Eafe was required to return to her kin in Kent does not align with the results of a close examination of what is elaborated in the hagiographical tradition.

It is crucial to explore the contents of the *Mildrith Legend* so that I can reconnect Domne Eafe to her Mercian family, which in turn will illuminate her and her daughter's continued familial connections to the Mercian elite family. While the recensions of the *Mildrith Legend* vary slightly in their retelling, the general premise remains unchanged. According to the texts, after having their four children, Domne Eafe and Merewalh separated due to the love of God. Both the king and queen entered religious life in Mercia, but these locations are not disclosed. Their three daughters were also dedicated as oblates at this time.[740] The *Mildrith Legend* then turns to Kent, Domne Eafe's natal kingdom, to focus on her two younger brothers, Æthelberht and Æthelred. The two brothers had been left as wards of their cousin, King Egbert of Kent, because their father, Eormenred, had died, the cause of which remains unknown. The age of the two boys is unclear, but their murder is noted as having taken place while at the royal *vill* of Eastry while still under the charge of Egbert. The perpetrator of the crime is where the various texts begin to diverge. It is unknown whether this action had been commanded by Egbert or if his trusted councilor Thunor was acting alone. Regardless, Egbert was alerted to the murder and the bodies of the two princes were revealed by Thunor, who

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[738] These arguments typically centre around the textual history of the *Mildrith Legend* and literary histories regarding Domne Eafe's daughter, Mildrith. Domne Eafe and her role as first abbess at Minster-in-Thanet has received little scholarship, but unfortunately, this is beyond the scope of this dissertation: Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*; Stephanie Hollis, "The Minster-in-Thanet foundation story," *ASC* 27 (1998): 41–64; Mary Dockray-Miller, *Motherhood and Mothering in Anglo-Saxon England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 9–41.
[739] Yorke, *Nunneries*, 31.
[740] Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 73–87; *AOELS*, 456–57.

had hidden them. This murder was complicated because the princes were related to the king and in order to pay compensation (*wergild*), an immediate family member had to be called to court.[741] It seems the only living, immediate family member available was Domne Eafe, their older sister.

All *Mildrith Legend* variations recount that Domne Eafe had remained in Mercia after her separation from Merewalh, which indicates that she possibly had remained there by choice. Where she had been residing is anyone's guess, but presumably, she was at some sort of monastic foundation or living as a female religious at a personal estate.[742] It has previously been assumed that it was necessary for Domne Eafe to return to Kent because that is where her biological kin originated, but this interpretation may derive from the translated terminology of the sources and their implied meanings. In particular, the interpretation of the text alongside the benefit of historical hindsight leads to the assumption that certain royal women anticipated moving and treated their first monastery as temporary.

A singular text is most representative of these interpretations from hindsight: the Anonymous OE *Sanctae Mildryðae* found in London, BL, Cotton MS Caligula A.xiv.[743] While describing the actions of the council gathered by King Egbert, the text claims that Egbert ordered that Domne Eafe should be *gefeccean* from Mercia so that she could accept compensation for her murdered brothers. The editors of this text translate *gefeccean* as 'command' which insinuates that Domne Eafe had little choice in the matter. However, there are two possible translations for this verb. Either *gefeccan* which can indeed be translated as 'command', but can also be translated as 'fetch', or *gefecgan* which translates 'to seize'.[744] If the intended verb was *gefeccan*, editors could have chosen the more demanding 'command' as opposed to 'fetch' which indicates that Domne Eafe had a choice to return to Kent. If the given verb was *gefecgan*, this points to Domne Eafe's clear lack of choice. She was required to come to Kent through either patriarchal demands, or societal/juridical pressures. However, the OE version of the *Mildrith Legend* is a later rendition dated to the eleventh century, and thus could be more reflective of the text's contemporary attitudes rather than seventh-century reality.

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[741] For more on *wergild*, see: Lukas Bothe, Stefen Esders and Han Nijdam, ed., *Compensation and Penance: The Monetary Logic of Early Medieval Conflict Resolution* (Leiden: Brill, 2021); Tom Lambert, *Law and Order in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017); Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century, Vol. I Legislation and Its Limits* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

[742] Whether this was a formal nunnery, double house, or smaller personal grouping as described in Bede's *Letter to Ecgbert* is unknown. For more on this, see: Lisa Bitel, "Gender and the Initial Christianization of Northern Europe (To 1000 CE)," 423–24 and Albrecht Diem, "The Gender of the Religious: Wo/men and the Invention of Monasticism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Women & Gender in Medieval Europe*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 430–46; Sarah Foot, *Veiled Women, Volume I: The Disappearance of Nuns from Anglo-Saxon England* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 35–60; Yorke

[743] *AOELS*, 454–461.

[744] Joseph Bosworth and T. Toller, eds., *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), 390.

The other edited texts of the *Mildrith Legend* translate and interpret Egbert as 'summoning' or 'inviting' Domne Eafe back to Kent to receive compensation for her brothers, which also confirms Domne Eafe's ability to choose.[745] Words that are far from a demand and more of a request. This negates the presumption that Domne Eafe was required to return to her paternal kin. She may have intended to remain in her affinal kingdom of Mercia to reside with closer biological relatives, her children. The only close family members we have evidence for still present in Kent had been her younger brothers, who had been murdered. Other paternal kin in Kent were farther removed and she likely had had minimal contact or held some resentment toward them for the crime committed against her familial branch. Indeed, it seems that she only returned to Kent of her own volition due to promises of an extensive compensation consisting of a personally chosen parcel of land. Upon Egbert's request, Domne Eafe left Mercia and returned to Kent, receiving between forty and eighty hides (the texts vary on the amount), in Thanet.[746]

Bede's *HE* continues to support my suspicion that formerly married women, such as Domne Eafe, were not required to return and remain with members of their paternal or maternal line like previously thought, which makes determining the location of their estates important because it may show intention behind their movements. One account that is particularly telling is the narrative described by the *HE* concerning Hild, the famous abbess of Whitby (d. 680). Hild was a royal member of the Deiran line, being the daughter of Hereric, the nephew of King Edwin. This securely places her paternal kingdom as Deira.[747] After she decided to enter a religious life, she travelled to East Anglia to join her sister, Hereswith, who was already living in a monastery while waiting to cross to the continent.[748] Hereswith had married an East Anglian king and was mother to King Aldwulf (r. 662/3–713), which indicates that Hereswith had remained in her affinal kingdom, likely to reside with her son.[749] Hild stayed in East Anglia for a year with the intention of joining Hereswith on her journey to the continent to enter Chelles. However, this was not to be the case because Bishop Aidan recalled Hild to Northumbria where she was given land near the River Wear to found her own

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[745] This is partly reliant on Rollason's interpretation. Unfortunately, some of the *vitae* found in this cycle have not been edited or digitised. For those that have, see: Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 96 and 122–23; *Historia Regum*, ch. 8 (ed. Arnold, 11); *AOELS*, 458–59.

[746] The texts are not in agreement when it comes to the amount of land granted to Domne Eafe. Additionally, they are also inconclusive on the type of measurement. It ranges between 40 *aratri*, 48 hides, 48 *aratri*, 80 *aratrorum iugera* and 80 hides. Rollason, *Mildrith Legend* and *AOELS*, 459.

[747] I discuss the significance of this in chapter five.

[748] Bede, *HE* iv.23 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 406–7).

[749] It is unclear which East Anglian king Hereswith had married. Bede never reveals who Aldwulf's father was, but the later royal genealogies list his father as Æthelric. This is much more acceptable in my opinion than placing Æthelhere — an East Anglian king contemporary to Hereswith — as Hereswith's husband. For more, see: Frank Stenton, "The East Anglian Kings of the Seventh Century," in *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Doris Stenton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 394–402; Dumville, "Anglian Collection"; Yorke, "Queen Balthild's 'monastic policy'," 9.

monastery.[750] As described in previous chapters, the situation in Northumbria at this time was hostile to members of the Deiran royal house. It is understandable that Hild and Hereswith would choose to stay in a kingdom where their relation was through marriage if the Deiran royal line was suffering from the overlordship of the Bernician royal family. However, the general pattern as accepted by scholars would have both sisters returning to their natal lands or lands connected to their mother, making this story exceptional. Although, neither Bede, nor other sources find this situation exceptional, only the religious zeal of Hild. It was her choice to return and the fact that Hereswith did not travel with her supports this view.

In light of Domne Eafe's choice to return to Kent, despite her entry into religious life in Mercia, her motives for returning and remaining in Kent are apparent: the large grant of land made by King Egbert ensured the establishment of a wealthy double house. Only one text in *Mildrith* states a possible, but unconvincing, alternative motive. Goscelin's *Vita Mildburgae* states that Domne Eafe left for Kent because she valued Kentish churches over Mercian palaces and would rather be in the company of Archbishop Theodore.[751] It is probable that this statement is literary flare on Goscelin's part to acknowledge the Kentish ecclesiastical supremacy at this time. It is more likely that she had returned to her paternal kingdom to establish a royal foundation with land she had legally obtained through juridical process instead of through marriage which had the potential to revert to the royal demesne upon her death.[752] Domne Eafe had already been residing in Mercia as a female religious, but it is unclear whether she was an abbess. With her own religious house founded on personally held Kentish land her daughter(s) could succeed as abbess upon her death. This was a well-recognised trend between retired queens and their daughter(s) in early monastic double houses. In addition to the other events illuminated in *Mildrith Legend*, the legacy Domne Eafe envisioned for her daughter(s) was likely the determining factor for her return to Kent and establishment of Minster-in-Thanet.

Domne Eafe's choice for returning to and remaining in Kent has now been established, so I will now turn to exploring her daughter Mildrith's arrival at Minster-in-Thanet because this creates a clear, traditionally biological Mercian connection which becomes important later during my examination of the charters. Domne Eafe's daughter, Mildrith, did succeed as abbess at Minster-in-Thanet, and it appears she marked Mildrith as her successor at an early stage. Two of the *Mildrith Legend* recensions have Domne Eafe requesting for Mildrith to join her at Minster-in-Thanet and then sending Mildrith to the monastery at Chelles for

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[750] Bede, *HE* iv.23 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 406–7).
[751] Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 80–1.
[752] See: Pauline Stafford, *Unification and Conquest: A Political and Social History of England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), 175–6; Julia Crick, "Women, Wills and Moveable Wealth," 20–1.

education.[753] While most of the tale is littered with hagiographical conventions, that Mildrith spent time at Chelles rings true because Bede describes the movement of elite daughters to the continent to undertake monastic vows and/or education, particularly at Brie, Chelles, and Andelys-sur-Seine.[754] Mildrith did not remain on the continent for long unlike some of her contemporaries. After spending time at Chelles training under the Abbess Wilcoma, the abbess decided that Mildrith should marry one of her relatives. Mildrith refused this advance, and Wilcoma apparently tried to harm her by either burning her or putting her in a lit oven. After having survived the ordeal, Wilcoma assaulted Mildrith, ripping out some of her hair. This chunk of hair was sent by Mildrith to her mother at Minster-in-Thanet, informing Domne Eafe of the poor treatment. It is apparent that most of this tale is informed by hagiographic tropes, certainly the miraculous events surrounding the burning or oven, but women sending messages to loved ones about poor treatment are highlighted in other sources.[755] Upon receiving Mildrith's message, Domne Eafe sent legates to retrieve her daughter, which turned into a clandestine rescue mission. Mildrith was returned to Minster-in-Thanet and her mother, where she was then consecrated and became abbess after her mother's death.[756] Mildrith's time at Chelles for education can be viewed as preparation for her future role at her mother's monastery. It could be that Mildrith's early involvement with Minster-in-Thanet might be indicative of Mercian involvement as well, but I will have to turn to other sources to make this determination.

I will now explore what the early charters of Minster-in-Thanet can reveal about Mildrith's position there and any mobilisation of Mercian kinship networks. Early charters for Thanet survive thanks to the foundation's eventual assimilation into the holdings of St. Augustine's.[757] Domne Eafe, under the alias Æbba, appears in grants S 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, and 18.[758] The dating of the earliest charter (S 10) has been determined as 1 March 689, and the latest (S 18) as April 697.[759] Domne Eafe's series of charters is generally viewed as being authentic, or at least having an authentic basis. Other charters show donations given to Mildrith, who became abbess sometime after Domne Eafe's last charter in 697. The exact date of Mildrith's succession to abbess cannot accurately be determined because of the large

[753] Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 11 and 76–8.
[754] Bede, *HE* iii.8 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 236–39).
[755] One case found in Gregory of Tours, has Childebert invading Spain to rescue his sister, Clothild, from her husband, King Amalaric. Whether this tale was constructed for an excuse for Childebert's invasion is not important here, but rather Clothild's message of poor treatment and a bloodied rag. See: Gregory of Tours, *HF* iii.10 (ed. Krusch and Levison, 106–7).
[756] Dockray-Miller argues Mildrith's consecration as abbess can be witnessed in London, Lambeth Palace Library MS 427, which is edited in *AOELS*, 464–67. See: Dockray-Miller, *Motherhood and Mothering*, 9–41.
[757] See above.
[758] Kelly, *St. Augustine's*, no. 40–44 and 46.
[759] For the revised dating of S 10, see: Kelly, *St. Augustine's*, 141–42 and below.

time gap between the charters. The earliest date of her first charters (S 86 and 87) is between 716/17.[760] This gives us a timeframe of nineteen to twenty years, which is simply too broad a range to give a precise date for succession. However, Mildrith continues to receive grants in subsequent charters S 26, and 1180, the last of which is dated 14 October 727.[761] All Mildrith's grants have generally been deemed authentic.[762]

The most interesting charter in this grouping is the earliest, S 10, which has elements of the original gift of land for Minster-in-Thanet and shows Domne Eafe mobilising her Mercian kinship to secure her lands. This is a grant for forty-four hides (*manentes*) *in Sudaneie* on the isle of Thanet and twelve hides in the area of Sturry.[763] Most scholarship concerning this charter has centred around problematic dating and various mentioned rulers confirming in succession. Whitelock and Kelly have convincingly solved the issues of dating. Kelly has dated the main portion of the grant given by King Swœfheard to 1 March 689, and Whitelock dated the later confirmation by Æthelred to 8 January 691.[764] Additionally, Kelly has concluded that the charter is a "composite text, built up from more than one charter and incorporating additional material on the previous history of the land."[765]

The instability in Kent described by the *HE* during the early days of Minster-in-Thanet is illuminated because the history of the land given to Domne Eafe is listed in the charter.[766] The grant claims the original grantors of the forty-four hides had been Kings Hlothhere and Eadric. This is an amount of land that falls in the range described by variations of the *Mildrith Legend*.[767] Hlothhere was brother and successor to Egbert, and Eadric was his son. Hlothhere succeeded Egbert after his death and seems to have confirmed the *wergild* described in the *Mildrith Legend* to Domne Eafe in a land grant. However, Hlothhere's succession was not as stable as it seems. He later died from wounds sustained in battle against Eadric, who had instigated an uprising with the South Saxons.[768] This took place in 685, and Eadric ruled for the next year until his death. Afterwards, Mul, a West Saxon usurper to the Kentish throne, reigned between 686 to 687.[769] It seems during this time Domne Eafe had to seek yet another confirmation for her lands because it is marked that she exchanged money (*pecunia digna*) for

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[760] This is the estimated dated of both, see: Kelly, *St. Augustine's*, no. 49 and 50.
[761] After this date, Mildrith's successor, Eadburh begins to receive grants as abbess beginning in 748, but it is suspected by Kelly that she succeeded sometime before 735/6, see: Kelly, *St. Augustine's*, xxv–xxvi and no. 47, 48, 51.
[762] Only one charter (S 17) is considered an outright fabrication due to dating conflicts. See Kelly's breakdown of the arguments.
[763] Kelly, *St Augustine's*, 139–40.
[764] Kelly, *St Augustine's*, 141–2 and Dorothy Whitelock, "Succession among Kentish Kings," in *The Framework of Anglo-Saxon History to A.D. 900*, ed. Kenneth Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976), 142–44.
[765] Kelly, *St. Augustine's*, 142–43.
[766] Bede, *HE* iv.26 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 430–31).
[767] Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 75, 78, and 81.
[768] Bede, *HE* iv.26 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 430–31).
[769] *ASC* A 686 and 687 (ed. Bately, 32).

this new grant from Mul despite already having occupied the lands in question for some time and the briefness of Mul's reign. Swœfheard and Wihtred, another son of Egbert, succeeded Mul after he was murdered by the Kentish people.[770] The *HE* confirms Swœfheard and Wihtred's co-rulership despite Swœfheard originating from the East Saxon royal house.[771] For a third time, Domne Eafe had to seek yet another grant for her lands at Thanet.

Domne Eafe, after seeking grants for the same lands from three different rulers in the space of five to ten years, sought confirmation from a non-Kentish source who was ruler of a stable kingdom and a kinsman, King Æthelred of Mercia. Domne Eafe sought out her Mercian kinsman for assistance to end her struggles. The last confirmation of grant S 10 was made by Æthelred in what seems to be two places identified as *Mirafeld* and *Stapulford*. Both locations are thought to be in Leicestershire, and if they are the towns of Marefield and Stapleford, they lie only about seven miles apart.[772] Leicestershire is solidly within the heart of the Mercian kingdom, and therefore, in order to request the fourth and final confirmation of this grant, it appears Domne Eafe had to return to Mercia. Due to her marriage to Æthelred's brother, Merewalh, it can be safely assumed they knew one another. At this point Æthelred had likely regained *imperium* over Kent and therefore offered his support by confirming the lands originally given to Domne Eafe by Egbert. The confirmation of this charter by Æthelred confirms that Domne Eafe and Mildrith had maintained their connections to Mercia despite being in another kingdom along the southern coast of England. Later grants continue to confirm this.

Before I continue to explore Domne Eafe and Mildrith's maintained Mercian connections, it will be beneficial to study the other early charters for Minster-in-Thanet to see the mobilisation of other matrilineal connections. This will also allow me to map these lands later on, the premise of this chapter. The series of charters dating to Mildrith's time as abbess expands our view of lands gained through kinship. Most are associated with Mildrith's matrilineal connections (such as her mother's paternal kin in Kent) but locating some of these lands is difficult. Charter S 1180 is the first grant of land. Æthelberht, son of King Wihtred and one of Mildrith's Kentish relatives, granted land near 'the river Limen' that had formerly been inhabited and possessed by Ickham, and meadows in an area called *Hammespot*.[773] A later OE addition to the text possibly details the extent of these lands and their purpose:

> *Hec sunt Pascua porcorum, Brentingesleag on Limenwearawalde,*
> *Weoccing peorrocas, Hlossanham, on Oxnaiea anum wrede,*

[770] *ASC* A 687 (ed. Bately, 32).
[771] Bede, *HE* iv.11 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 364–69) and v.8 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 474–75). For more about the East Saxon royal family and kingdom, see: Barbara Yorke, "The kingdom of the East Saxons," *ASE* 14 (1985): 1–36.
[772] Kelly, *St. Augustine's*, 146.
[773] Kelly, *St Augustine's*, 162–65.

Brunesbeam on Weowerawealde 7 on Blean anum wrede 7 on Bocholte anum wrede.[774]

It is clear from this addition that the land's intended use was the grazing of pigs. Della Hooke has noted that the Weald was 'one of the best-known regions of early medieval transhumance', or the seasonal movement of animals for grazing.[775] The grant was likely given to Mildrith for the maintenance of the Minster and her *familia*, even if this is not explicitly stated in the charter.

Several of the lands can be identified with modern villages. *Ieccham* has retained its name in the modern form of Ickham and lies just north-east of Canterbury. This is not included in the map because Ickham did not form part of the grant. The areas of *Oxniea*, *Blean*, and *Bocholte* can be identified as the Isle of Oxney, Blean Forest, and Buckholt Wood, respectively.[776] Blean Forest and Buckholt Wood can both be found near Canterbury, but the Isle of Oxney lay approximately fifty to forty miles south-west of these two locations. Near the location of the Isle of Oxney in the High Weald, Eilert Ekwall associates *Hlossanham* with present Losenham which is by the river Rother.[777] In between these two disparate locations can be placed *Brunesbeam on Weowerawealde*, with *Weowerawealde* translating as 'in the wood of the men of Wye'. I have decided to add this location to the map despite *Brunesbeam*'s lack of identification because the area is relatively small.

Other listed areas cannot be placed, however. The identification of the river Limen is not secure. Kelly follows Ward's suspicions that this piece of land likely lies near Ruckinge, which indicates that the East Stour River is the Limen.[778] Hooke has identified the Limen as the modern River Rother but traces this river to its termination near the town of Lympne which can actually be identified again with the East Stour. This may be a confusion based on Ekwall's entry for Lymn, which states that Lympne was the former name of the Rother.[779] I have chosen not to map this specific plot of land because of the uncertainty surrounding the location of the Limen. The other listed areas of *Brentingesleag* and *Weoccing* have also not been mapped because of their uncertain location.[780] Therefore, out of the listed lands, I have only been able

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[774] Even though this is a later addition, it is plausible this was an accounting of the actual lands for the purpose of documentation. Ibid., 163.
[775] Della Hooke, "The Woodland Landscape of Early Medieval England," in *Place-Names, Language and the Anglo-Saxon Landscape*, ed. Nicholas Higham and Martin Ryan (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011), 143.
[776] For Isle of Oxney and Blean, see: Kelly, *St. Augutine's*, 165. For Buckholt, see: Hooke, "Woodland landscape," 147.
[777] A community heritage and research project is underway in this area called the Lossenham Project. See: lossenham.org.uk. For place-name, see: Eilert Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), 290.
[778] Kelly, *St. Augutine's*, 165 and Gordon Ward, "The River Limen at Ruckinge," *Archaeologia Cantiana* 45 (1933): 129–32.
[779] Ekwall, *English Place*, 294.
[780] Andrew Breeze has convincingly argued against Sawyer's suggestion that Brenchley can be identified with *Brentingesleag*: "The Kent Place-Name Brenchley," *Nomina* 21 (1998): 154–56.

to map the locations of Losenham, *Weowerawealde*, Blean Forest, Buckholt Wood, and the Isle of Oxney. These can be found in image 4.2.

With the lands and estates of Minster-in-Thanet mapped, I return to the parts of this particular series of charters which support that Domne Eafe and Mildrith maintained familial ties to the Mercian royal family. Not only did Domne Eafe seek out her brother-in-law, King Æthelred, for his confirmation concerning Kentish lands, but later grants for toll remissions also ensured beneficial trade for Minster-in-Thanet holdings. With the high possibility that Kent fell under Mercian *imperium*, first after Æthelred's campaign in 676 and then again after Cædwalla abdicated the West Saxon throne in 688, Domne Eafe and Mildrith's familial ties to Mercia would have preserved the holdings of Minster-in-Thanet.[781] Additionally, I suggest that having a Mercian princess near critical ports would have benefitted Mercia as well. The maintenance of Mercian kinship ties was likely a two-way street.

Direct evidence of maintained kinship does not survive, but three grants of toll remission allude to recognised ties of kinship between the elite women of Minster-in-Thanet and the Mercian royal family. Mildrith's charters S 86 and 87, and her successor, Eadburh's charter S 91, all have King Æthelbald of Mercia (r. 716–757) as the grantor.[782] His granting of toll remissions in London has generally been used by scholars for purposes of illustrating Mercian *imperium* over Kent, but here I focus on the mentioned kinship. The tolls issued during Mildrith's life do not explicitly state the familial relationship between herself and Æthelbald. However, the later toll remission granted to her successor, Eadburh, in 748, states that Æthelbald granted the remission *amore consanguinitatis religiose abbatisse Mildrede*.[783] This implies Æthelbald both recognised their familial connection and that he continued to support a monastery originally founded by Mercian family members.

Ultimately, the picture of Minster-in-Thanet as purely a Kentish institution is misleading because of the underlying Mercian matrilineal ties and networks of women at this specific religious foundation. Domne Eafe, far from being forced to return to her paternal kingdom, instead chose to return for the promise of an extensive *wergild* for her murdered brothers. Using this compensation, she was able to establish an elite monastery that had ties to both Kent and Mercia. Her daughter Mildrith, already dedicated to the Church, followed her mother of her own volition. However, the Mercian royal family backed Mildrith's move as evidenced in the charters with continued support for their royal family members despite their foundation being in a separate kingdom. These Mercian ties were maintained over years and used to gain support in times of trouble or instability, and to gain potential beneficial trade

[781] I discussed this event in chapter two.
[782] Kelly, *St. Augustine's*, no. 49, 50, and 51.
[783] Kelly, *St. Augustine's*, no. 51.

deals. While evidence is outwardly silent concerning reasons for Mercian support of a Kentish establishment, there are implicit benefits for this support. Minster-in-Thanet was a well-placed monastery along the Kentish coast which surely traded with the continent. The ownership of locations and allies in prime areas for trade could only benefit Mercian economies, which in the latter half of the seven century were becoming an especial concern for the royal family. Additionally, having a coastal location with close familial ties located in Kent may have offered a resting point during itineration when Mercia held *imperium* over Kent. Both factors would have been highly motivating for Mercian rulers to maintain contact, and continues to support the view that these Mercian elite women may have been performing a function for the kingdom of Mercia.

4.1.3 – Mildburh and the Magonsætan Foundation at Much Wenlock

I continue my topographical investigation of Mercian female religious foundations and the strategic possibility of women's installation at certain locations by moving to another of Merewalh and Domne Eafe's daughters, Mildburh. Like her family, evidence for Mildburh's association with Much Wenlock in modern Shropshire remains in hagiographical text. Much of her life, beyond what can be glimpsed in small snippets of information, is unknown. Despite some inconsistency, the sources that do remain agree that she was abbess of a double house at Much Wenlock which later became the site of her saint's cult.[784] The *Mildrith Legend* and *þe Secgan* only confirm her resting place at Wenlock.[785] Yet, further information has been preserved in the twelfth-century compilations of the *Miracula inventionis beate Mylburge virginis*, attributed to Odo of Ostia, and the *Vita beate ac Deo dilecte virginis Mylburge*, strongly considered to be Goscelin's work.[786] Most scholarship focuses on the later Cluniac priory established during the Anglo-Norman period, and the texts created for St. Mildburh's cult at this time.[787] Wenlock endured as a monastery until at least the tenth century, if not longer.[788] After William I took the English throne, the monastery was re-established as a Cluniac priory by Roger de Montgomery, earl of Shrewsbury during the late eleventh century.

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[784] Wenlock is one of the few early monastic foundations that has direct evidence as a double house. See: Boniface, *epistola X* (ed. Tangl, pp. 7–15); Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 243–45; Rollason, "List of Saints".
[785] See: Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 77; Rollason, "List of Saints," 89; *Die Heiligen Englands*, ed. Liebermann, 11.
[786] Hayward, "*Miracula Inventionis*," 546–49; Finberg, *ECWM*, 199–200.
[787] See: Simon Yarrow, "The Invention of St Mildburg of Wenlock: Community and Cult in an Anglo-Norman Shropshire Town," *Midland History* 38, no. 1 (2013): 1–15; Karen Ströber, *Late Medieval Monasteries and Their Patrons: England and Wales, c.1300–1540* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), 9–64; Paul Antony Hayward, "The *Miracula Inventionis Beate Mylburge Virginis* attributed to the 'Lord Ato, Cardinal Bishop of Ostia'," *EHR* 114, no. 457 (1999): 543–73.
[788] Charter evidence of the early tenth century confirms it was still in existence as a monastery. See: S 221.

Patronage of Much Wenlock was soon back in royal hands by 1102.[789] This re-foundation coincided with the rapid expansion of numerous monastic orders during the Anglo-Norman period. A feature coinciding with this expansion was the proliferation of written saints' lives.[790] However, what is important to this section, is that Mildburh can be located during her lifetime at the foundation at Much Wenlock.

An extract from the *Vita Mylburge*, generally referred to as the "Testament of St. Mildburh", is the main focus of this section because it is important for determining the extent of Mildburh's lands and estates.[791] Other sources either only list her association with Wenlock as a saint, or they do not detail Mildburh's estates or land interests within the text. Found only in London, BL Add. MS 34,633, the *Vita*'s compiler claimed that he stumbled upon a document which had either been drafted or dictated by Mildburh herself shortly before her death. According to the text, she wished to document grants made throughout her life for the protection of those assets in the future.[792] Through the preseveration of "Mildburh's Testament", we have been able to reconstruct five charters: S 1798, 1799, 1800, 1801, and 1802. Paul Hayward is skeptical of the text's veracity but ultimately believes that the reconstructed charters are based on genuine text.[793] This is in line with many scholars, like Finberg, who generally hold these charters as genuine documents despite evidence of hidage amounts that have been tampered with.[794] It is believable that Mildburh, for the benefit of her monastery's holdings, wanted claims of estates committed to written documentation, and that a later compiler found this document within the abbey records. Mildburh's connection to Wenlock is secure due to her presence in the earliest renditions of the *Mildrith Legend* and her recognised saint's cult in the earlier portion of *þe Secgan*.[795] It appears that only the hidage amounts show signs of tampering. Therefore, I am certain the locations of granted lands found in the recovered charters are accurate.

I will begin my examination of Mildburh's lands and estates with Much Wenlock, not only because this was her primary foundation, but it appears her father Merewalh had originally donated the lands to another female religious. The first grant detailed in the "Mildburh's Testament" highlights how Mildburh gained Wenlock, and the exchange also

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[789] Ströber, *Late Medieval Monasteries*, 38–9, no. 146.
[790] John Blair, "A Saint for Every Minster?," in *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 476.
[791] Edited by: *ECWM*, 197–216.
[792] *ECWM*, 201.
[793] Hayward, "*Miracula Inventionis*," 544.
[794] See: *ECWM*, 200–1 and 206–7; Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 92–7; Margaret Gelling, *The West Midlands in the Early Middle Ages* (London: Leicester UP, 1992), 81–3 and 95; Hayward, "*Miracula Inventionis*," 544.
[795] According to Rollason, the earlier half shows signs of originating sometime during the ninth century. See: Rollason, "Saints' Resting Places," 63–4.

illuminates that this specific location may have been intentional. Her preliminary statement details that lands were granted to her by Abbot Æthelheah and Abbess Liobsynde in exchange for lands at *Homtun*.[796] These exchanged lands consisted of the main estate of Wenlock, and its attachments at: Magana, in the district of Lydas, and by the river Monnow. Mildburh's two stepbrothers and rulers of the Magonsæte at this time, Merchelm and Mildfrith, confirmed the grant alongside Æthelred and Archbishop Theodore. This dates the exchange to sometime between 675 and 690.

The presence of Abbot Æthelheah and Abbess Liobsynde lead to questions concerning previous dealings with the kingdom of Mercia. Æthelheah is marked as an abbot of a monastery named *Icanho*, which scholars have identified with modern Iken, Suffolk placing it solidly within the pre-Conquest kingdom of East Anglia.[797] *Icanho* is said to have begun construction in 654 (*ASC* A, B, C; E 653) under the supervision of Abbot Botulf, who had apparently spent time on the continent and was sought after by contemporaries for his monastic learning.[798] This connection to the continent described by the later eleventh-century *vita* might be the cause for Liobsynde's appearance at Wenlock. It seems that Botulf was in contact with two East Anglian princesses who resided in a continental monastery; and for this reason, Yorke speculates that Liobsynde (a Frankish name form) came from the monastery of Faremoutiers.[799] Due to the contents of this charter, it makes it highly likely that Mildburh was not the founder and first abbess of Wenlock but rather the second.[800] This indicates that Mildburh's return to her natal kingdom of the Magonsæte was not just serendipitous nor that these lands were gifted to her by her brothers, Merchelm and Mildfrith, the rulers at the time of this exchange. She was there to regain lands by exchange that were originally bought from her father, Merewalh. The return of Mildburh to this particular foundation, formerly in the possession of the Magonsæte and Mercian royal family, may point to the purpose behind the move.

The connections to Abbot Botulf and his *familia* are also highly suspect and could illuminate additional Mercian ties to East Anglia, which I discussed in Cyneburh's section above.

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[796] Some identify *Homtun* as Hampton, but others do not accept this identification. S 1798; *ECWM*, 202 and 204–5; Dorothy Whitelock, "The pre-Viking age church in East Anglia," *ASE* 1 (1972): 12.
[797] For more on this identification and the arguments around it, see: Francis Stevenson, "St. Botolph (Botwulf) and Iken," *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* 18, no. 1 (1922): 30–52; *ECWM*, 207; Whitelock, "pre-Viking age church," 10–12; S.E. West, N. Scarfe, and R. Cramp, "Iken, St Botolph, and the Coming of East Anglian Christianity," *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* 35, no. 4 (1984): 279–91.
[798] *ASC* A 654 (ed. Bately, 29). He is not mentioned in the *HE*, but he does make an appearance in the: *Vita Ceolfridi*, ch. 4, in *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, OMT, ed. Grocock and Wood (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2013), 82–3. If the eleventh-century *vita* of Botwulf is correct, he spent some time on the continent before returning to England: *Vita Sancti Botulphi*, Acta Sanctorum (AASS), Junii, iv.324–30.
[799] Yorke, *Nunneries*, 27.
[800] See: *ECWM*, 208–9; Foot, *Veiled Women I*, 37.

As I explored, Mercian activity along the East Anglian borderlands intensified in the period between 650 to 660, with the creation of the Middle Anglian kingdom and the possible building of Peterborough Abbey. It is interesting that the same year Botulf is reported to have begun construction of *Icanho* on the coast of East Anglia (654), King Anna had been killed by Penda.[801] The year after this took place, King Æthelhere of East Anglia, Penda's ally, died with him at Winwæd.[802] Æthelhere is the suspected brother of King Anna.[803] With Æthelhere joining Penda shortly after Anna's death, it is possible that Æthelhere colluded with Penda to gain the East Anglian throne. That the lands at *Icanho* had been given to Botulf because of either his association with Penda or one of his children, is also a possibility. Mildburh maintained Wenlock's links to *Icanho* and Botulf's *familia*; although, Botulf had likely passed at this point because Abbot Æthelheah was acting as the primary grantor. It is particularly noteworthy in this first charter that the granted estates are to remain as Mildburh's personal estates to do with as she pleases. However, with the added stipulation that the foundation was to remain "under the jurisdiction of the church of the venerable Abbot Botulf".[804] The cause of this jurisdictional control under Abbot Botulf's *familia* was purely because the money originally used to purchase the Wenlock lands from Merewalh came from his church. If this is so, Botulf could have bought the lands at Wenlock from Merewalh because of his acquaintance with Merewalh's father Penda.

If Botulf was an acquaintance with the former Mercian king Penda, this may explain his ability to purchase Much Wenlock from the Magonsæte, and additional connections with the Mercian royal family could further support his Mercian connections. The *þe Secgan* lists St. Botulf as resting at *Medeshamstede* or Peterborough Abbey.[805] The same Mercian establishment that shares connections with Cyneburh and Cyneswith, daughters of Penda, as discussed above. However, the cult of St. Botulf was prolific, and sources list his body not only at Peterborough Abbey, but also at Thorney and Bury St. Edmunds.[806] Thus, the presence of St. Botulf's cult at Peterborough becomes questionable. If his cult was present at Peterborough Abbey at some point, however, this might lend weight to the thought that Botulf had close associations with the Mercian kingdom.

Botulf's initial purchase of Wenlock from Merewalh, likely because of dealings with Merewalh's father, Penda, and his renowned monastic learning, resulted in a double

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[801] "Her Onna cyning wearþ ofslægen, and Botulf ongon mynster timbran æt Icanho": *ASC* A 654 (ed. Bately, 29).
[802] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 290–1).
[803] Stenton, "East Anglian Kings".
[804] *sub jurisdicionibus ecclesiae venerabilis Botulfi abbatis*. See: S 1798 and *ECWM*, 202.
[805] Rollason, "Resting Places," 89; *Die Heiligen Englands*, ed. Liebermann, 11.
[806] For more, see: Whitelock, "Pre-Viking church," 10, no.3.

monastery ruled over by Botulf's associate, Liobsynde. Mildburh's whereabouts are unknown up until the charter for Wenlock. However, there are any number of Mercian religious foundations or foundations with Mercian associations where she could have been trained: like, Castor, Wenlock, or even with her mother at Minster-in-Thanet. It seems that after Botulf's death, and Merewalh's abdication of the Magonsætan throne, there was cause to regain the Wenlock estate sold to Botulf. Some reason to want these lands back under the supervision of a royal family member. The subsequent charters found in "Mildburh's Testament" add to this picture.

Moving to the other charters found in "Mildburh's Testament", I begin to add lands and estates associated with Mildburh which will then be mapped. The next two grants, S 1799 and 1800, are from Mildburh's stepbrothers and her cousin, Ceolred, who was reportedly Wulfhere's son. Merchelm and Mildfrith, with the consent of Æthelred, gave her an assortment of lands located at: Clee Hill, Kenbecleag, Chelmarsh, and by the river Corve.[807] Afterwards Ceolred granted a small estate called Penda's Wyre.[808] Again, like the first charter, both grants claim that the lands were Mildburh's property, and she could dispose of them how she wished. There is no mention of *familia* or a church which is common in grants to the religious. This seems to indicate a closer relationship to not only her brothers, but possibly her cousins as well.

The remaining two charters, S 1801 and 1802, document Mildburh's own purchases of land and are not directly associated with gifts from family. One purchase was for an estate at Lingen from a fellow servant of God named Feleburg who had originally received these specific lands from Coenred, another of Mildburh's Mercian cousins.[809] The other charter was for an estate called Magdalee which was purchased from one of Æthelbald's men named Sigward.[810] I will not include these lands in my analysis because they were not received from family, but rather purchased.

With lands attributed to Mildburh explained, I will now determine what can be mapped. Unfortunately, most of her estates in S 1798 cannot be placed because modern place-name equivalents have not been determined. These are the estates listed as *Magana* and district of *Lydas*. The estate near River Monnow can, while not accurately, be marked next to the river which happens to be one of the natural boundaries of the present Welsh/English border. This indicates that the estate near Monnow would have been found in the Mercian/Brittonic borderlands. Finberg notes that it is not suspicious nor indicative of a

[807] S 1799; *ECWM*, 202–3 and 205.
[808] S 1800; *ECWM*, 203 and 205–6.
[809] S 1801; *ECWM*, 203 and 206.
[810] S 1802; *ECWM*, 203 and 206.

spurious charter that Mildburh received Welsh lands.[811] Indeed, I have noted in other parts of this thesis that Mercia and the kingdoms of Brittonic-Wales were close allies, and that Merewalh may have had a Welsh mother.[812] This leads to another estate, noted by Finberg, found in Goscelin's *Vita Mildburgae* which notes that she frequently visited her estate in *Lanchmylien*.[813] This is yet another Brittonic-Welsh estate, which Finberg associates with the present day town of Llanfilo, Powys.[814] With this, it seems increasingly likely Mercia had also fostered familial networks with the Brittonic-Welsh in the west, but it also raises the question of whether Merewalh was truly from the Mercian royal family.

Because questions concerning Merewalh's familial connection to the Mercian royal family have been raised, I must address current scholarship on his kinship. There have been previous questions raised as to the validity of Merewalh being a son of Penda. Stenton rejected that Merewalh could be Penda's son based on lack of alliterative naming elements with other members of the Mercian royal family.[815] It is true that the name is usual, and that the last naming element 'walh' can be associated with *wealh* or 'foreigner'.[816] For this reason, Kate Pretty hypothesised that Merewalh was possibly a Briton given a subkingdom by Penda as reward for loyalty.[817] This would certainly explain how Mildburh came to possess an estate in a Brittonic kingdom. However, Pretty's determination has been met with some resistance, and I would have to agree.[818] Penda had many children, evidenced by both near contemporary and later sources, but we only have mention of one wife, Cynewise.[819] It is highly probable that Penda had had more than one wife or partner, and with Mercia's close ties to the Brittonic kingdoms to the west, these possible other partners very well could also have been Briton. This hypothesis works to answer for both Merewalh's unusual naming elements in relation to Penda's branch of the Mercian ruling family and Mildburh's gaining of a Brittonic estate. The estate at *Lanchmylien*, which was part of Mildburh's holdings, may indicate reasons behind her reinstalment in the Magonsætan territory.

With Merewalh and Mildburh's possible familial connections explained, I return to the examination of the lands and estates associated with Mildburh to be mapped. Lands found in charters S 1799 and 1800 are a little easier to locate and place. The estates of Clee Hill,

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[811] Finberg, *ECWM*, 210.
[812] See chapter two and three.
[813] Finberg, *ECWM*, 210.
[814] The *vita* attributed to Goscelin is housed in London, BL, Add. MS 34,633, fols. 206–216v. This manuscript has not been digitised, nor has there been an edition of the *vita* published. Finberg and Talbot both agree on Goscelin being the author, but Rollason is more reserved. See: Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*, 25–6, no. 60; Finberg, *ECWM*, 200.
[815] Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 47.
[816] Bosworth and Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 1173.
[817] Kate Pretty, "Defining the Magonsæte," in *Origins*, ed. Basset, 176–77.
[818] Gelling, *West Midlands*, 81–2.
[819] Bede, *HE* iii.24 (ed Colgrave and Mynors, 290–1).

Kenbecleag, and Chelmarsh found in S 1799 all have modern equivalents in Shropshire where Wenlock is found. *Kenbecleag* is associated with Beckbury, which lies almost due east of Much Wenlock. Clee Hill and Chelmarsh have retained these place-name forms. The lands 'by the River Corve', were tentatively identified by Finberg as Domesday holdings in Bourton, Shipton and Sutton.[820] However, after examining the path of Corve, the Domesday, and "The Survey of English Place-Names", I believe this estate can solidly be located at Shipton.[821] The River Corve flows through two later pre-Conquest hundreds — Patton and Culvestan.[822] The estate of Sutton is found in the Shrewsbury hundred, not the Patton nor Culvestan hundred. Furthermore, the river does not travel that far north. The estate at Bourton, while closer to the river than Sutton and located within the Patton hundred, is still a distance from the headwaters of Corve. Shipton is the only place that could have an estate within walking distance of the river. Therefore, this is the village located on the map. I have mapped Mildburh's estates in image 4.3.

The location of Much Wenlock's estates found primarily in the Magonsœtan territory in the western-most areas of the Mercian *imperium* suggest strategic placement much like Cyneburh's establishment at Castor. For instance, Mildburh gained the core of Wenlock's estates through a transfer of property with a religious foundation already established by an Abbess Liobsynde, which indicates that the Mercian royal family wanted to regain the property at Wenlock. The exact purpose for this repossession is now lost, but the concentration of estates in areas of the wider Mercian *imperium* suggest some sort of strategic function for the Mercian royal family. If the Brittonic-Welsh estate mentioned within Goscelin's *Vita Mildburgae* is accurate, it only adds to this picture of deliberate installation of Mercian elite women, and also could confirm Mercian familial relations with the western Brittonic-Welsh kingdoms. The growing picture is one where the lands and estates given to Mercian elite women could be found in the wider Mercia *imperium*, but not the Mercian core lands, when the locations of Mildburh, Mildrith and Cyneburh's are taken into account.

4.1.4 – Mildgith in the North

I now move to Domne Eafe and Merewalh's most mysterious daughter, Mildgith, who only survives in the genealogical reckonings of the hagiographical texts of her sisters. Just as Mildrith and Mildburh, it is alluded that Mildgith was given as oblate early in her life.

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[820] Finberg, *ECWM*, 148.
[821] See: Margaret Gelling, ed., "Shropshire," *Survey of English Place-Names* (1990–2012): epns.nottingham.ac.uk/browse/Shropshire.
[822] *Domesday book: Shropshire*, volume 25, 252v (ed. Thorn, 3c).

However, one small detail in four of the *Mildrith* texts complicates our picture for the instalment of Mercian elite women in the wider Mercian *imperium*.[823] When listing the saintly siblings and their resting places, the *Mildrith Legend* in addition to *þe Secgan*, states that Mildgith's body lay somewhere in Northumbria. It is not elaborated whether she resided and died in this area, or if her body was later translated there. In this case the sources are so laconic they prove impossible to decipher with any certainty.

Despite this, I would still like to elaborate two speculative scenarios to try and explain this odd location for a Magonscætan and Mercian princess. First, if Mildgith did spend her life in Northumbria, her residence at a northern religious foundation occurred sometime during the last quarter of the seventh century, much like her sisters. This would indicate that Merewalh's younger brother, Æthelred, was on the Mercian throne which may have influenced the decision to send her to a particular site. The frequent occurrence of his name in this chapter suggests that Æthelred certainly had a strategy for the whereabouts of his female kin. With his marriage to the Northumbrian princess, Osthryth, this might have made entering religious life at a preeminent Northumbrian foundation easier for Mildgith. As previously discussed in this thesis, Æthelred's marriage to Osthryth, appears to have influenced interactions between the two political units. Particularly, the favouring of monastic institutions such as Bardney in Lindsey and curtain saints' cults like St. Oswald. However, it is also just as likely that Mildgith chose to take up an appointment in Northumbria of her own volition, similar to Hild's sister Hereswith and other East Anglian women who chose to travel to the continent.

The second possibility for Mildgith's presence in Northumbria is her possible translation to a Northumbrian monastery after death. Her location in Northumbria might be reflective of a later translation because the texts of the *Mildrith Legend* were composed quite late. Saints were frequently moved and Mildgith could have been no exception. However, without further evidence to support these possibilities, all that can be said is somehow Mildgith found her way to Northumbria and was buried at an undisclosed location.

4.1.5 – Wærburh: A Reluctant Participant?

The last elite woman with solid ties to the seventh-century Mercian royal family that I will examine is Wærburh, the daughter of King Wulfhere and Queen Eormenhild. Much of her life is unknown beyond what was written by Goscelin in the *Vita sancte Werburge virginis*

[823] These are the four texts listed by Rollason as: Bodley 285; *Vitae Mildrethae* (a combination of three texts); *Vita Werburgae: Genealogia*; and finally, the *S. Mildryð* (the Old English text). Rollason, *Mildrith Legend*.

(hereafter *VSW*).[824] Given that Goscelin wrote the *VSW* as part of a cycle of early saints' lives for the monastery at Ely, much of the scholarship has traditionally examined her role in Ely's hagiographic tradition.[825] More recently, her saint's cult has been examined in isolation by Alan Thacker.[826] As I discussed in chapter three, much like her royal cousins, Wærburh was connected to the Kentish and East Anglian royal families through her mother, Eormenhild.[827] These connections to East Anglia eventually led her to Ely and her maternal great aunt, Æthelthryth. At Ely under Æthelthryth's tutelage, she gained a monastic education.[828] According to tradition, Wærburh, like her cousins Mildrith, Mildburh, and Mildgith, remained a virgin choosing a religious life over marriage. This could just be a hagiographic convention used to conform with the other Ely saints and Mercian relations of her generation.[829] Regardless, Wærburh undertook her vows at Ely, and was later joined by her mother Eormenhild after Wulfhere's death in 675.[830] Eormenhild remained at Ely, later succeeding as abbess after her mother Seaxburh, who was abbess before her, had died.[831] However, Wærburh would not remain in Ely and this is where it becomes important to examine her lands.

Traditions differ when it comes to where Wærburh resided before she received lands from her uncle King Æthelred, but a brief detour to discuss her whereabouts illuminates another instance of matrilineal political networks. The *LE* makes different claims when compared to the *VSW* and *Þa halgan*. After Eormenhild succeeded Seaxburh as abbess of Ely, she moved Wærburh to Sheppey where she succeeded to the role of abbess.[832] This move is not out of the realm of reality. Sheppey was founded and built by Seaxburh before she moved to Ely to be with her sister, Æthelthryth. Therefore, Sheppey was in Wærburh's maternal line.[833] She very well could have taken her first position as abbess there. The other claim the *LE* makes is less believable. After Eormenhild's death, the *LE* states that Wærburh

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[824] The *VSW* was written by an anonymous author. However, Rosamond Love, the most recent editor of the text, has convincingly argued for Goscelin of Saint-Bertin as the author. See: Love, *Female Saints of Ely*, lxxi–lxxviii; Alan Thacker, "St Wærburh: The Multiple Identities of a Regional Saint," in *The Land of the English Kin: Studies in Wessex and Anglo-Saxon England in Honour of Professor Barbara Yorke*, ed. Alexander Langlands and Ryan Lavelle (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 444–47.
[825] For example: Virginia Blanton, "Presenting the Sister Saints of Ely, or Using Kinship to Increase a Monastery's Status as a Cult Center," *Literature Compass* 5, no.4 (2008): 755–71; see introduction in, *Female Saints of Ely*, ed. and trans. Love. Even though Ridyard explicitly states that Wærburh was a recognised Mercian saint, they have still grouped their explanation under the heading of Ely saints: Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, 60 and 181.
[826] Thacker, "St Wærburh," 443–66.
[827] See chapter four.
[828] *LE* i.15 (ed. Blake, 32–3) and *VSW* ch.2 (ed. Love, 34–5).
[829] Hollis, *Women and the Church*, 71 and n. 101.
[830] *LE* i.17 and i.36 (ed. Blake, 35 and 51–2); *VSW* ch.3 (ed. Love, 36–7); *Natale Sancte Eormenhilde* (hereafter *NSE*), ch. 6 (ed. Love, 16–19).
[831] *LE* i.36 (ed. Love, 51–2).
[832] *LE* i.36 (ed. Love, 51–2).
[833] This is attested in the *Vita beate Sexburge regine* (hereafter *VBSR)*, ch. 10–13 (ed. Love, 154–63).

returned to Ely and succeeded her mother as abbess at the foundation there.[834] The account of the *LE* contradicts the *VSW* and *Þa halgan* which places her in Mercia after her time in Ely and possibly Sheppey. According to the *VSW*, she was recalled to Mercia by her uncle Æthelred and given control of sacred Mercian monasteries which were rich and powerful.[835] These monasteries are listed as: Threekingham, Weedon (Weedon Bec), and Hanbury.[836] *Ða halgan*, an earlier source than *VSW*, marks her resting place at *Heanburh* (Hanbury), which confirms this estate. Her body was later removed from Hanbury and translated to *Legeceastre* (Chester), which Thacker convincingly argues occurred during Lady Æthelflæd's reign in the beginning of the tenth century.[837]

For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the estates given to her by her uncle, King Æthelred because they illustrate yet another instance of the Mercian royal family offering land and estates to their elite women in particular areas. While there are abundant church dedications throughout England for St. Wærburh, these sites are not linked to the historical Wærburh and thus not of importance to this chapter.[838] The three estates at Threekingham, Weedon, and Hanbury, are the only lands for which we have evidence in the *VSW* showing her tenure while living. I have mapped these three estates in image 4.4.

Further examinations of the locations of Threekingham, Weedon, and Hanbury are necessary because they share interesting parallels with the estates given to the other Mercian elite women in this chapter. Threekingham was located in the borderlands between Mercia and the subkingdom of Lindsey. Weedon, which is specifically listed as *regio patrimonio suo*, is approximately sixty-six miles to the south-west of Threekingham.[839] What is interesting in this case, is that Weedon is listed as being 'her royal inheritance'. It seems that Æthelred turned over an estate that would have been part of her inheritance if she had remained in the secular world, and this estate shares parallels to another estate linked to a Mercian elite woman, whom I shall discuss shortly. The last estate, Hanbury, is due east of Weedon, lying closer to Wenlock lands, and appears to have economic implications.

Upon brief inspection, the spread of these three estates appears different from the lands of other Mercian elite women because they are less localised along the borderlands. Other Mercian elite women show clustered lands within the wider Mercian *imperium*, while

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[834] *LE* i.37 (ed. Blake, 52).
[835] *tradidit ei monasteriorum sanctimonialium que in suo regno pollebant principatum*: *VSW* ch. 4 (ed. Love, 36–7).
[836] *VSW* ch. 5, 8, and 10 (ed. Love, 38–41, 44–5 and 46–9).
[837] "…heo wearð bebirged on þam mynstre þe is genemnod Heanburhæ heo wearð eft upadon and nu resteð on Lesgeceastre þare birig.": Liebermann, *Die Heiligen*, 7; Thacker, "St Wærburh," 457.
[838] For a detailed listing, see: Love, ed., *Female Saints of Ely*, xliii–xlv and Thacker, "St. Wærburh".
[839] *VSW* ch. 5 (ed. Love, 38–41). Weedon is in Northampton which was the heart of Mercia. It is also just six miles west of Harpole, the area of a recent archaeological find attributed to an elite woman. There may be connections, but the findings have yet to be released.

Wœrburh's estates spread through the centre of Mercian territory. However, two of these estates, Hanbury and Threekingham do lay in the extended Mercian *imperium*.

Hanbury lies near to Worcester which was within the bounds of Hwiccan territory and has particularly interesting implications to this chapter because the estate shares close parallels with Cyneburh's land at Castor. This estate originally lay in Hwiccan territory, but as I discussed in chapter two, Mercia had likely extended their *imperium* into this kingdom from an early date.[840] Della Hooke noted that the religious foundation found at Hanbury, situated on a hill, shows signs of being an important Iron Age fort that remained in use during the Roman period, likely because of the major routeway located nearby.[841] This is similar to Castor near Peterborough Abbey, in that it is a site showing previous Roman activity near a major roadway/routeway. Additionally, a record of a charter (S 1822) has King Wulfhere granting fifty hides at Hanbury to an Abbott Colman with use of all attached meadows, woods and salt-pits.[842] The appearance of salt-pits in relation to the estate at Hanbury indicates that the *VSW* was correct when it claimed the lands given to Wœrburh were rich and powerful. The proximity to Droitwich (some five miles west), another prominent salt-pit that was economically productive for the Mercian kingdom during the last quarter of the seventh century, suggests King Æthelred's grant to Wœrburh was similar to the other estates granted to the Mercian elite women in this chapter.[843]

Threekingham, the other estate Æthelred gifted to Wœrburh, follows the emerging pattern of Mercian elite women's religious foundations found in the wider Mercian *imperium*. This land lay within or near to the kingdom of Lindsey, and a traveler could reach the monastery at Bardney within a day's journey. I discuss the importance of the monastery at Bardney in the next chapter, but it must be mentioned here that this monastery was a favourite of Æthelred and Osthryth and likely was founded by the royal couple.[844] This further indicates a pattern that proves intention behind the areas that were granted to Mercian elite women for the purpose of founding monasteries. The one mystery here is the estate at Weedon which lies in modern Northamptonshire and is well within Mercian borders and centrally located. This causes the emerging pattern in Mercian women's estates to become less straightforward.

The appearance of Weedon, well within the Mercian territory at the end of the seventh century, may not be much of a mystery if we account for later evidence intimating

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[840] For a later eighth and ninth century history of the religious foundation at Hanbury, see: Steven Bassett, "The landed endowment of the Anglo-Saxon minster at Hanbury (Worcs.)," *ASE* 38 (2009): 77–100.
[841] Della Hooke, *Anglo-Saxon Landscapes of the West Midlands: the Charter Evidence*, BAR 95 (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 1981), 59–65.
[842] See: Finberg, *ECWM*, no. 195, 86; Hooke, *Anglo-Saxon Landscapes*, 59; Maddicott, "London and Droitwich," 28.
[843] For the importance of Droitwich to the Mercian kingdom, see: Maddicott, "London and Droitwich".
[844] Bede, *HE* iii.11 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 246–47).

local connections with the women of the Mercian royal family. As I mentioned above, the *VSW* labelled the estate at Weedon as Wærburh's *regio patrimonio suo* indicating that she was already in line to inherit the lands.[845] If we account for the additional evidence, this area seems to be a clustering of lands near the same central area as Weedon associated with other Mercian elite women — and potentially one royal infant — which share tentative links to the Mercian royal family. These are the estates which are attached to the supposed children of Penda, SS Eadgyth and Eadburh, and two of his grandchildren, SS Osyth and Rumwold. It is not my goal here to offer a thorough examination of these four potential descendants of Penda and the Mercian royal family.[846] Rather, I am looking purely at the estates attached to these potential royal family members before their veneration as saints, to briefly explore this cluster of lands to explain Wærburh's estate at Weedon. The estates under consideration are Aylesbury (Buckinghamshire), Adderbury (Oxfordshire), and King's Sutton (Northamptonshire). You can view these estates in relation to Weedon in image 4.5. These lands according to Thacker show signs of being minsters and monasteries of royal estates, which support claims made in the *vita*e of SS Osyth and Rumwold linking these two saints and their maternal aunts to the Mercian royal family.[847] Thus, a brief background on each will be important for this discussion on Weedon's location and how it relates to this chapter's emerging pattern.

I begin with St Osyth because her *vita* carries evidence for not only Osyth herself, but also her maternal aunts, SS Eadgyth and Eadburh. Osyth is the most well-attested elite woman with links to the Mercian royal family. As discussed at the end of the previous chapter, she was reportedly the granddaughter of King Penda through her mother Wilburh.[848] The Osyth tradition is problematic at best, with the earliest text composed in the twelfth century having been lost but preserved in antiquarian notes. My examination has benefitted from the work of David Bethell who detangled the different traditions.[849] According to the various texts, Osyth's

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[845] *VSW* ch. 5 (ed. Love, 38–41).
[846] See chapter three.
[847] Alan Thacker, "Kings, Saints, and Monasteries in Pre-Viking Mercia," *Midland History* 10, no. 1 (1985): 6–8.
[848] See chapter three.
[849] Written by a man named William de Vere, the original text has been preserved in part by notes taken by antiquarian John Leland. Bethell examines and reconstructs the tradition, which seems to have been elided with another seventh-century woman, St Osyth of Essex. However, the separation of these two traditions is still a matter of debate. Hohler was the first to propose that St Osyth's surviving tradition was an elided text of two separate women. Bethell later attempted to disentangle the two traditions. However, Hagerty later questioned this based on the historical context which could lend weight to a single tradition for one Osyth. However, it seems a number of traditions linked to Osyth have confused retellings. Therefore, I am more inclined to accept the idea of two saints' *vita*e and two separate women with the name Osyth. For more, see: Christopher Hohler, "St Osyth and Aylesbury," *Records of Buckinghamshire* 18 (1966): 61–72; D. Bethell, "The Lives of St Osyth of Essex and St Osyth of Aylesbury," *Analecta Bollandiana* 88 (1970): 75–127; R.P. Hagerty, "The Buckinghamshire Saints Reconsidered 2: St Osyth & St Edith of Aylesbury," *Records of Buckinghamshire* 29 (1987): 125–32; John Blair, "A Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Saints," in *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Thacker

mother, Wilburh, had married King Frithuwald who has been identified with the Mercian subking Frithuwald of Surrey.[850] After detailing her parentage, the *vita* then connects her to many other Mercian relations. Particularly, Penda's daughters, Cyneburh (of Castor) and Eadburh, along with his granddaughters, Mildrith, Wærburh, and an Elstreda and Elgida whose names have not definitively been identified.[851] Osyth, we are told through Leland's notes on the *vita*, was born at the royal estate of Quarrendon (Buckinghamshire) which lies near the estate of Aylesbury, belonging to her aunt Eadgyth by gift of Eadgyth's unnamed mother.[852] Presumably, Eadgyth's mother had left her the estate of Aylesbury through an inheritance. Osyth following the example of her religious aunts, chose to remain chaste for love of the Lord. In light of this oath, Osyth began serving her aunt Eadgyth at Aylesbury as a woman religious — as Eadgyth had been using her estate for this purpose.[853] After a time, Osyth's father, Frithuwald, recalled her to the court for her marriage to King Sighere of the East Saxons.[854] According to the Osyth tradition, she remained a virgin despite her marriage and was later granted the ability to found her own monastery at Chich (St Osyth, Essex). It appears from this description, that Weedon was not the only inherited estate belonging to a Mercian elite woman in this region. Wærburh's aunt Eadgyth had Aylesbury as her inherited lands as well.

It might be fruitful to further investigate Wærburh's Mercian aunts and their estates because of Aylesbury's similarities to Weedon. Very little is known about Eadburh and Eadgyth beyond the handful of mentions in the Osyth tradition. Their connections as daughters of Penda and association with their specific estates at Aylesbury and Adderbury are secure. Aylesbury was later the site of St Eadgyth's cult and also one of Osyth's cult sites. Additionally, Adderbury translates as 'Eadburh's *byrig*'.[855] However, much like St Osyth, there seems to be confusion in the later traditions for the two women.[856] This confusion was likely caused from later tenth to twelfth-century cult production where compilers had a vast

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and Sharpe (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 549; Andrew Sargent, "A Misplaced Miracle: The Origins of St Modwynn of Burton and St Eadgyth of Polesworth," *Midland History* 41, no. 1 (2016): 1–19.

[850] The kingdom of Surrey had come under Mercian control by, at the latest, 664. See: Barbara Yorke, "The kingdom of the East Saxons," *ASE* 14 (1985): 32; John Blair, "Frithuwold's kingdom and the origins of Surrey," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 97–107. Also, see chapter two.

[851] Hohler speculates that Elstreda can be identified with the Abbess of Repton, Ælfthryth, mentioned in Felix's Life of Guthlac. There has been no speculation on the identity of Elgida. See: Hohler, "Osyth and Aylesbury," 63. For opposition to Hohler's view on the identity of Elstreda, see: Bethell, "Lives of Osyth," 82, no. 3.

[852] Bethell, "Lives of Osyth," 83.

[853] Bethell, "Lives of Osyth," 83.

[854] This is where Hagerty's supposition of a factual marriage between Sighere, a documented king of the East Saxons, and Osyth rings true. See: Hagerty, "Buckinghamshire Saints Reconsidered," 127. For more on the East Saxons, see: Yorke, "East Saxons," 1–36. For more on the marriage see chapter three.

[855] First acknowledged by: Frank Stenton, "Place-names as Evidence of Female Ownership of Land in Anglo-Saxon Times," in *Preparatory*, ed. Doris Stenton, 6.

[856] For more on the confusion of SS Eadgyth and Eadburh, see: Bethell, "Lives of Osyth," 83–4, no. 1 on both pages; Hagerty, "Buckinghamshire Saints"; Sargent, "A Misplaced Miracle".

assortment of old and obscure local saints' cults from which to choose.[857] This can be viewed in the case of St. Eadburh. After her death, her body was later translated from Adderbury to Bicester where she was enshrined. There are several cults of St. Eadburh, which are most assuredly different women. Ridyard believes that the relics of Penda's daughter, St. Eadburh, were possibly translated during the tenth century to the monastery at Pershore in a case of mistaken identity.[858] Alongside this particular translation, Ridyard also noted the man responsible for appropriating a saint's *vita* of a better-known West Saxon St. Eadburh, which he then attached to the relics of the Mercian St. Eadburh who had recently been translated to Pershore. Cases like this have made it difficult to ascertain the veracity of Eadgyth, Eadburh and Osyth's connections to both the Mercian family and the estates on which they resided. However, the accumulation of supporting evidence discussed throughout this thesis demonstrates that these elite women linked to the Mercian royal family were likely factual.[859] With this in mind, the estates at Aylesbury and Adderbury were certainly under the authority of two Mercian royal sisters, and the proximity to Wærburh's estate at Weedon and its description as her inheritance, while offering some answers, still does not support the other pattern emerging in this chapter: the granted estates of Mercian elite women located in the wider Mercian *imperium*.

This question of an aberrant pattern found in Wærburh's estate at Weedon may be answered by one further example found in the eleventh-century *Vita sancti Rumwoldi*.[860] Another potential Mercian royal saint, Rumwald is associated with the site of a former Northamptonshire minster named King's Sutton, which is near the location of Weedon (approximately twenty miles southwest).[861] There are many strange elements to this *vita* which fall outside the scope of this thesis, so I will not discuss these features here. However, I will focus on his supposed familial connections and the location of his birth, which was later the site of a minster.

The *Vita sancti Rumwoldi* claims that Rumwold was the son of an unnamed daughter of Penda and her Northumbrian husband.[862] While the daughter is unnamed, the only daughter of Penda that had married a Northumbrian during Penda's lifetime was Cyneburh; thus, it may

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[857] John Blair, "A Saint for Every Minster? Local Cults in Anglo-Saxon England," in *Local Saints and Local Churches*, ed. Thacker and Sharpe, 466.
[858] Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, 134–36.
[859] See chapters two and three.
[860] The earliest manuscript copy can be found in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 9, p. 53–8. For more on the manuscript tradition and its composition, see: Love, ed., *Three Eleventh-Century Anglo-Latin Saints' Lives*, clix–clxiv and clxxiii–clxxxvii.
[861] Thacker has noted that King's Sutton was the site of an ancient minster which had likely been responsible for promoting the cult of St Rumwold. See: Alan Thacker, "Kings, Saints, and Monasteries in Pre-Viking Mercia," *Midland History* 10, no.1 (1985): 6–7. For the association of St Rumwold with King's Sutton, see: *Vita Sancti Rumwoldi* ch. 6 and 12 (ed. Love, 102–3 and 112–13).
[862] *Vita Sancti Rumwoldi* ch. 1–3 (ed. Love, 94–99).

be that this unnamed daughter was Cyneburh and the mentioned Northumbrian king was her husband Alhfrith. I am not alone in this observation in thinking Cyneburh was Rumwold's mother.[863] If this is the case, it would explain why a royal child of the Northumbrian kingdoms was born in this particular area.[864] What makes King's Sutton of interest to this chapter is that this site is significantly close to Eadburh's religious foundation at Adderbury — only one and a half miles. Additionally, this estate is in the same region as Weedon and approximately twenty-eight miles northwest of Aylesbury. With the potential that Cyneburh was Rumwold's mother, it could be she was either travelling to be with her sister Eadburh, or these lands were part of her estates, but this must remain speculation until further evidence emerges.

With the addition of these three estates at Aylesbury, Adderbury and King's Sutton, Wœrburh's estate at Weedon is not unusual. In fact, these four estates seem to be part of a grouping of lands dedicated to either Mercian elite women through grant or inheritance, or associated with the Mercian royal family. Weedon was specifically marked as part of Wœrburh's inheritance and the reason for her receiving the land. This may also be the case for the estates at Aylesbury, Adderbury, and King's Sutton. Aylesbury had been inherited by Eadgyth through her mother. This indicates that Eadgyth's mother was either originally from this area, or had received it from Penda. The royal estate of Quarrendon where Osyth is said to have been born, lies a short distance to the northwest of Aylesbury.[865] Additionally, King's Sutton was associated with Rumwold and his Mercian mother, Cyneburh, and the eponymous Adderbury indicates Eadburh's possession of that estate. These four estates were clustered in a particular area, which shows that they were likely not part of a political strategy during Wulfhere and Æthelred's reign in the last half of the seventh century. Instead, they might be indicative of Mercia's early push south out of the Trent River valley, which were the original, core lands of Mercia.[866] This indicates that Penda may have begun a strategy of mobilising networks of women for the purpose of maintaining the presence of the Mercian royal family in certain areas during the initial expansion of Mercian *imperium*.

4.2 – Conclusion: Serendipitous Location or Dynastic Strategy

The picture that has emerged throughout this chapter supports Yorke's original supposition that the location of royal women's religious foundations were part of broader

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[863] Thacker, "Kings, Saints, and Monasteries," 6; Love, ed., *Three Eleventh-Century*, clxii–clxiii.
[864] The *Vita Sancti Rumwoldi* claims Penda had invited the royal couple to the kingdom of Mercia so that his daughter could give birth. *Vita Sancti Rumwoldi* ch. 3 (ed. Love, 96–99).
[865] Bethell, "Lives of St Osyth," 83.
[866] See: Nicholas Brooks, "The formation of the Mercian kingdom," in *Origins*, ed. Bassett, 160–62; Barbara Yorke, "The Origins of Mercia," in *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon kingdom in Europe*, ed. Michelle Brown and Carol Farr (London: Continuum, 2001), 19–21.

dynastic strategies.[867] This is obviously one aspect of multivalent purposes for these female-founded and controlled religious foundations. This chapter focused on the secular dynastic purposes for these lands and estates granted to and, sometimes, inherited by Mercian elite women. Some of the granted estates discussed in this chapter, such as Castor or Hanbury, show signs of being Iron Age or Roman in origin, in addition to being highly accessible by either roadway, routeway, or river. As Blair has noted, this is the case for most of the early monasteries of this period, and this fact adds to the function and purpose of these estates.[868] After examining the estates and lands granted to and inhabited by Mercian elite women during their lives, a definite pattern has emerged. Image 4.6 is a map of the combined lands and estates of Mercian elite women.

First, all female-owned estates lay within the extended areas of the Mercian kingdom outside of the core lands centred on the Trent River valley. This is certainly the case for the lands and estates gifted to Penda's daughters, Cyneburh and Cyneswith, at Castor; Mildburh's lands and estates attached to Much Wenlock; and Wærburh's two estates at Threekingham and Hanbury. The lands at Aylesbury, Weedon, King's Sutton and Adderbury, while not fully in what would be considered the broader Mercian *imperium* during Wulfhere and Æthelred's reign, were certainly newly acquired lands during Penda's reign. These estates show signs of being hereditary and/or dedicated to the women (and one infant son) of Penda's line and thus received before Wulfhere and Æthelred's reign. This intimates that these estates were given to Mercian elite women in some form or fashion by King Penda during his reign, suggesting that offering the elite women of the royal line estates in the wider *imperium* was a strategy of Penda, and not a recent development of Wulfhere or Æthelred's reigns. The location of these lands in the wider Mercian *imperium* shows a preference for having elite women, with strong familial connections to the main ruling branch of the Mercian royal family, being given lands in the border regions. Whether this was for convenient stopping points on a king or queen's itinerary, as suggested by Yorke, or the presence of a royal family member for the purpose of maintaining a watchful eye over newly acquired areas is unknown. I suspect that both purposes were of equal importance to the Mercian royal family.[869]

A second emergent pattern observed through tracing the lands and estates of Mercian elite women, is their ability to choose where they resided. This is potentially the case with

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[867] See above and Yorke, *Nunneries*, 150–1.
[868] Blair, *Churches*, 149–52 and "Minster churches in the landscape," 35–58.
[869] The only known female-led monastery that breaks this pattern is Repton, which lies near the Trent River and the core of the Mercian kingdom. Felix's *Life of Saint Guthlac* has Guthlac entering the monastic life at Repton while a woman named Ælfthryth was abbess: *VSG*, ch. 20 (ed. Colgrave, 84–5). Whether she was a member of the royal family is questionable. Hohler hypothesised that the Elfrida mentioned in the Osyth tradition as Penda's granddaughter is the same Ælfthryth found at Repton. However, this remains supposition because no other evidence has been found to support this thought. See above.

Mildgith who reportedly resided and had a saint's cult in Northumbria. Nothing more is known about her time in the north, but during the period in which she was there — potentially beginning sometime around the end of Wulfhere's reign 670–675 — relations with Northumbria were unstable. Wærburh, despite eventually being recalled to Mercia, seems to have intended to remain at Ely with her mother and maternal relatives. This is the case for Mildrith as well, who also chose to follow her mother to Minster-in-Thanet but was allowed to remain unlike Wærburh. These last two examples might corroborate Yorke's observation in which a pre-Conquest woman had to retire or reside in a blood relative's kingdom.[870] However, I must reiterate that women can be viewed spending time in many kingdoms whether biologically related or not. We have the benefit of hindsight when it comes to observing elite women's movements, but the religious foundations in which they eventually settled very well could have been an unplanned destination. I point to the case of Domne Eafe as an example. She was already living as a religious in Mercia when she received a message from her relative King Egbert of Kent concerning the killing of her two youngest brothers. Her choice to return to Kent was not mandated. She returned for the opportunity of a large *wergild* on which she could found her own religious establishment. Thus, seventh-century Mercian elite women were likely not obligated to remain in the kingdoms of their blood relatives. They had freedom of movement, unless otherwise requested.

A last and more tentative observation concerns elite women choosing to 'opt out' of their royal duty as potential brides, but who could also still gain estates marked as their inheritance. Weedon is explicitly marked as part of Wærburh's inheritance when it was given to her by King Æthelred, her uncle. Eadgyth and Eadburh, the potential daughters of Penda, both retained and lived a religious life on the estates marked as their inheritance. This is made explicit for Eadgyth and her estate at Aylesbury which was inherited through her mother. It is more implicit for Eadburh's estate at Adderbury which was named after her. This ability to retain inheritance despite joining a religious life could also explain Mildburh's potential personal estate at *Lanchmylien* in Brittonic Wales. The location suggests she inherited the estate from a family member, either through her father Merewalh or granted to her by her half-brothers, whose maternity is unknown. It would be interesting to investigate this further in the future.

All three observed patterns point to Mercian elite women actively participating in the Mercian royal family's dynastic strategy of expansion and not being passive pawns. They could typically choose which kingdom they resided in, whether it be to follow a beloved mother or to remain in a place of their choosing. The lands and estates granted to, or even

[870] Yorke, *Nunneries*, 32.

seemingly inherited by, Mercian elite women by elite men of the Mercian family all lay within the wider Mercian *imperium* at the time of tenure. This evidence suggests these women took up positions in newly acquired or tentatively held areas for ease of the royal itinerary and for the oversight in a particular area, but this does not negate the religious aspect and duties of these lands. Rather, it is just another factor which would benefit the Mercian royal family temporally, in addition to spiritually.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored aspects of Mercian networks of women and their political use in various settings: particularly in marriage and administrative roles. As this thesis proves, seventh-century Mercian elite women were more independent and politically influential than previously thought or allowed by scholars. Furthermore, these women have never been studied as political agents beyond their gendered roles, nor has there ever been an examination of Mercian elite women as a subject on its own. It is clear from the case studies examined in this thesis that the feminine networks of the Mercian royal family were instrumental in both the operation of the Mercian kingdom and in shaping the political actions of both men and women.

The first aspect I explored in this thesis focused on the marriages of the Mercian royal family and diverged from typical investigations of seventh-century elite marriage by questioning the broad applicability of treating each marriage as purely an alliance.[871] Previous scholarship mostly assumed that seventh-century marriages were contracted for the sole purpose of alliance between hostile and friendly kingdoms, or between kingdoms with an imbalance of power — one polity reinforcing its *imperium* over another. It was an elite woman's duty to act as a mediator — typically envisioned as a peaceweaving bride — between the two kingdoms, through both the contracted marriage and the children it would hopefully create, blending the elite families together. In the case of two hostile political units contracting a marriage for peace, this could lead to problems for the couple, particularly the woman, when tensions were renewed between the families. This was certainly the case for the series of marriages between Northumbria and Mercia, as myself and many scholars have noted.

On the surface, the peaceweaving bride offers a broad explanation for these seventh-century elite marriages. Alliance was a major factor behind each marriage, and on a certain level, this was the expected outcome of the match. However, this thesis called for analysis beyond gender-coded roles, and beyond a term which runs the risk of flattening our understanding of the complexity behind each individual marriage. Chapter three demonstrated that though a poststructural investigation into the contemporary context surrounding each Mercian elite marriage, certain political strategies can be identified behind particular marriages. Two strategies stood out for the Mercian royal family. The first concerned the series of marriages contracted between the Northumbrian and Mercian families

[871] This was inspired by the work of Peter Baker and Megan Cavill. See: Baker, *Honour, exchange and violence*, 103–26; Cavill, "Formulaic Friþuwebban", 355–72 and *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies*, 280–95.

in the mid-seventh century, with King Oswiu of Northumbria as impresario. With this series of marriages, Oswiu attempted to subdue King Penda of Mercia whose growing influence and power throughout the second quarter of the seventh century threatened Oswiu's plans for an extended Northumbrian *imperium*. Additionally, there was an element of vengeance, as Penda had killed Oswiu's brother Oswald in battle. While these marriages were not outwardly negotiated by Oswiu and Penda themselves, their sons organised the two unions upon gaining rule of their subkingdoms. Ultimately, Oswiu's plan worked. Penda, lulled into a false sense of security in a territory he counted as an area with safe passage, was overtaken by Oswiu's forces and slaughtered. This case shows that not only were elite marriages driven by what we would classically call 'marriage alliance', but rulers could mobilise this expectation for more particular political agendas.

The second strategy illuminated by my close analysis of elite marriages was the way that the Mercians used their network of familial connections to extend their *imperium* in the south. The Mercian royal family tended to marry into the elite families of the territories and political units where they were trying to either gain influence or expand their *imperium*. Broadly understood, this trend can be described as a peaceweaving model. However, the forms of Mercian rulership and the political shifts explored in chapter two allude to more complex strategies of kingdom management and rulership. The Mercian royal family preferred to rule the Mercian hegemony through a network of family members acting as subkings and administrative agents. By expanding Barbara Yorke's findings in regard to this Mercian preference, I found that if no male Mercian family member was available to act in this administrative capacity, then a local elite would be married to a Mercian elite woman.[872] This was not done for peaceweaving or alliance building, but instead used to strengthen Mercian control of newly gained territory through a network of women. Any offspring born from the union would have royal Mercian blood, which would eventually incorporate the local ruling family or agent into the Mercian royal line. Furthermore, having a member of the Mercian royal family in these areas may have acted as a deterrent to rebellion or attack: a feminine symbol of Mercian familial power acting in a manner similar to that of a male elite.

The mobilisation of Mercian elite women as a symbol and source of power can also be observed in chapter four which examined the lands granted to and associated with Mercian elite women religious. Scholars have studied seventh-century women religious and their foundations before, and in fact, this constitutes the majority of our knowledge for women of this period. Where this thesis diverges is the acceptance that elite women religious maintained their secular familial networks and these secular family members mobilised this network of

[872] Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 107–8.

women for the benefit of the Mercian kingdom. The Mercian elite women found in this thesis were granted lands by Mercian elite men, or alternatively, inherited lands through their position as women of the royal line, evidenced through surviving charters and numerous saints' *vitae* which detail these transactions. Lands were also granted to the Mercian elite women for the establishment of religious foundations and for ensuring the continued survival of these religious communities. Additionally, it appears that some of the Mercian elite women were able to retain lands they had inherited even after founding and joining these communities.

Through topographical analysis of the lands associated with Mercian elite women religious, I mapped the location of these lands and a pattern emerged. These maps show that Mercian elite women religious were granted lands in Mercian territories used as 'buffer zones'. Furthermore, some of these areas had strategic significance because of their proximity to economically crucial areas such as salt mines, trade routes, or roads. This curious pattern can be explained if we understand the importance of Mercian elite women to the smooth operation of the Mercian political unit. First, strategically located religious foundations could provide convenient stopping points for the current ruling Mercian family in their itineration.[873] Second, and more importantly, these women could act as administrative agents for areas in need of more monitoring: a mobilisation of Mercian networks of women that mirrors the Mercian royal family's marriage strategy in the south.

It is my hope that by offering an examination of seventh-century Mercian elite women and their familial networks, through attending to ephemeral traces and questioning modern assumptions of power, scholarship can begin expanding beyond gendered binaries and female-coded roles as a sole means of analysis. The aspects of matrilineal connections and networks of women that I explored in this thesis have additionally illuminated numerous topics which would be profitable areas for future investigation of seventh-century elite women. For instance, if the same approach were taken for other early English kingdoms, other instances of independent feminine political action might be identified among elite women. It would also be interesting to study the extent to which elite women traced their familial networks, as the current thought is reticent to accept that early medieval families traced and kept contact with their extended kin.[874] Bede gives us an example for the possible extended kinship connection between Æthelburh of Kent and her kinsman, King Dagobert, but this is only one example and it may be fruitful to explore other potential attenuated familial links.[875] By exploring these kinship networks further and including the women of these lines, we may begin to see political actions differently. Additionally, Bede's language surrounding kinship links have shown the

[873] Yorke, *Nunneries*, 150–53.
[874] See kinship in the introduction and also: Traves, "Penance, Murder and Sanctity of Close Kinship".
[875] Bede, *HE* ii.20 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 204–5).

potential for deliberate intention behind word choice. I have shown that Bede not only may have used certain words to denote a marriage versus a non-marriage, he may have also differentiated between sibling relationships. A linguistic analysis is necessary, and I hope it will be completed sometime in the future. Lastly, there are unedited sources containing Mercian elite women, such as the *Vita Mildburgae* found in London, BL, Add. MS 34,633, fols. 206–9. This particular manuscript is not only unedited, but also remains undigitised. This text was the source of one of the estates found in chapter four and I would be curious to discover if more estates are mentioned in not only this manuscript, but others as well.

It is my hope that this thesis is just the beginning for the exploration of seventh-century elite women's secular political lives. By highlighting Mercian elite women and their networks, I have deepened our understanding of the early Mercian kingdom and the political strategies of the ruling family, particularly those of King Penda. What my methods could indicate for the other kingdoms of early pre-Conquest England remains to be discovered.

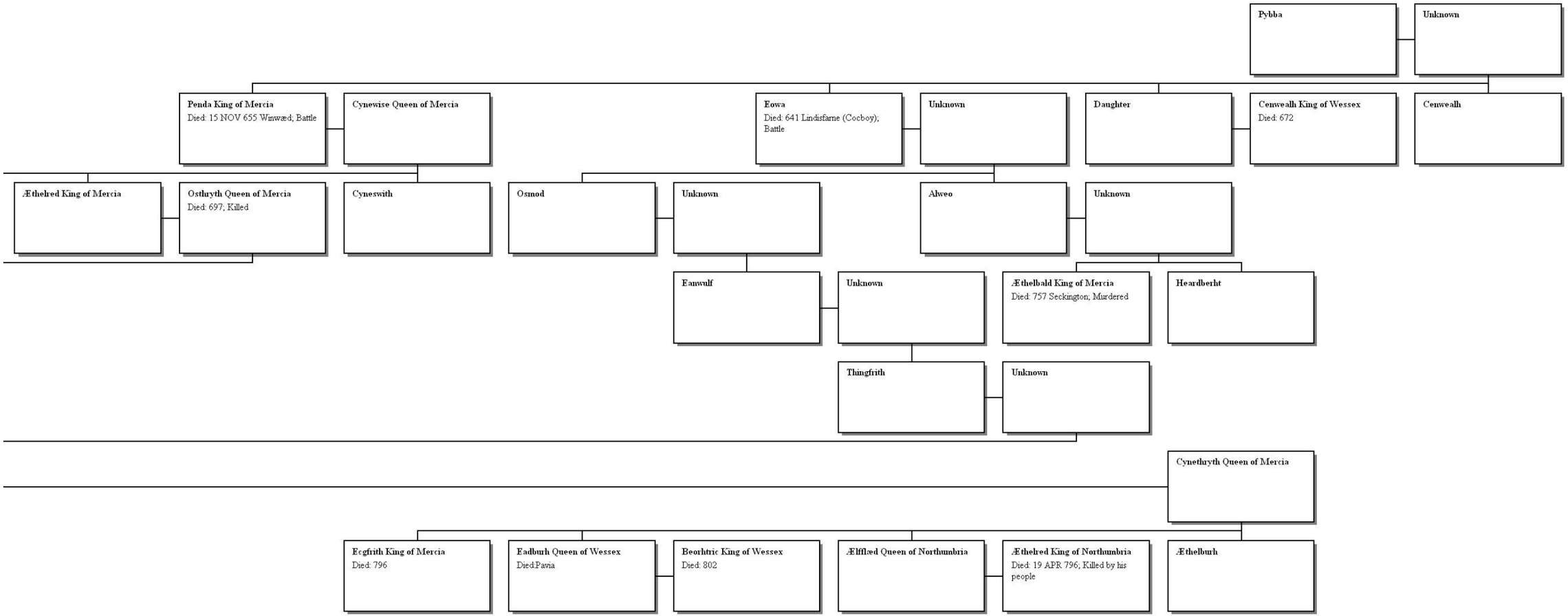


Figure 1.1 – Genealogy Chart of the Mercian Royal Family, chart 1 of 2

Images

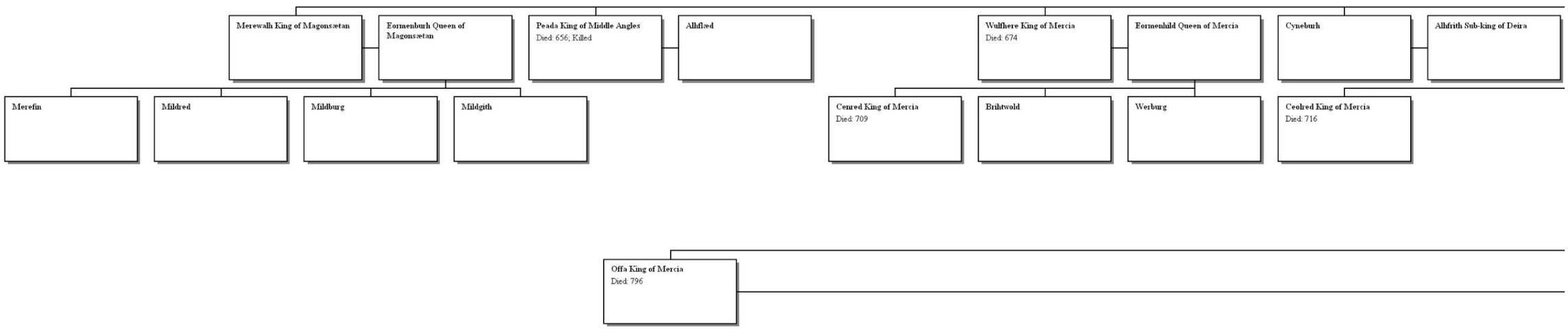


Figure 1.1 – Genealogy Chart of the Mercian Royal Family, chart 2 of 2

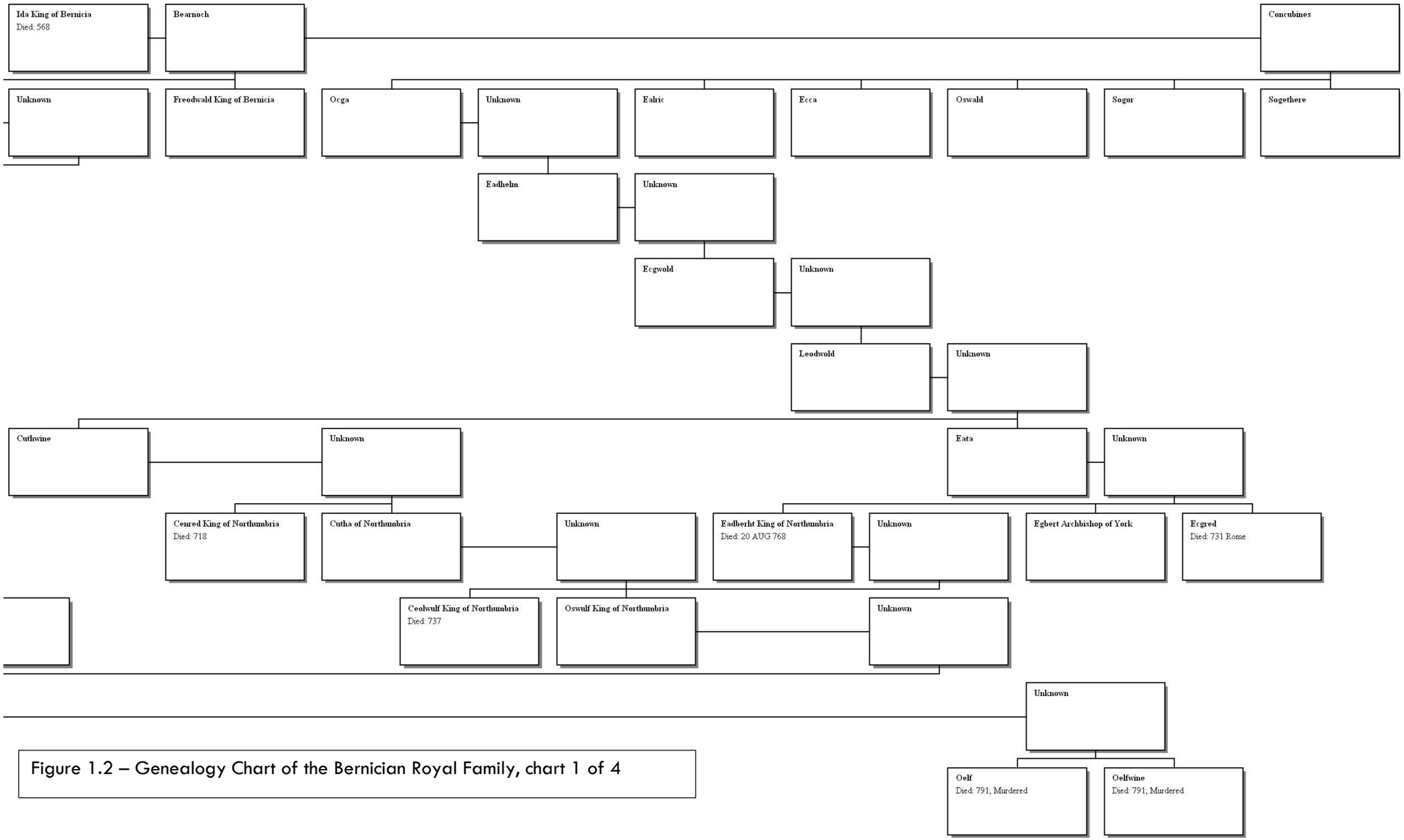


Figure 1.2 – Genealogy Chart of the Bernician Royal Family, chart 1 of 4

Bernicia I

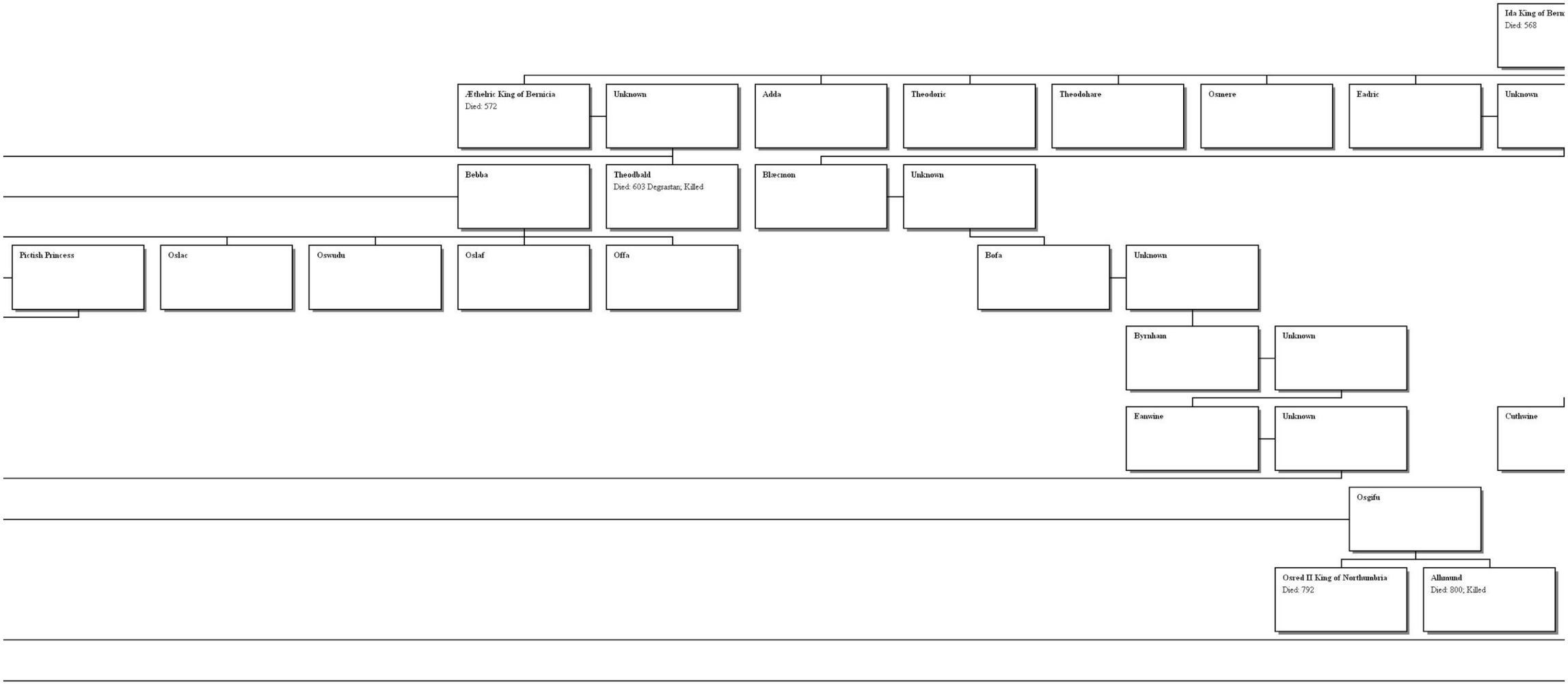


Figure 1.2 – Genealogy Chart of the Bernician Royal Family, chart 2 of 4

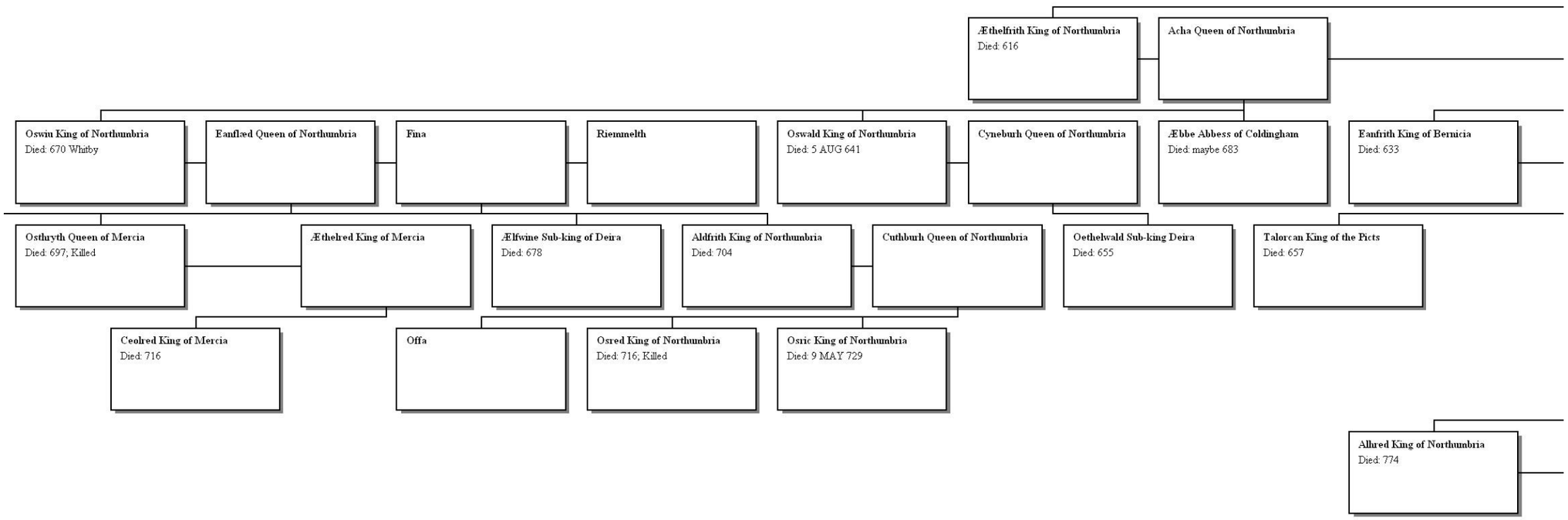


Figure 1.2 – Genealogy Chart of the Bernician Royal Family, chart 3 of 4

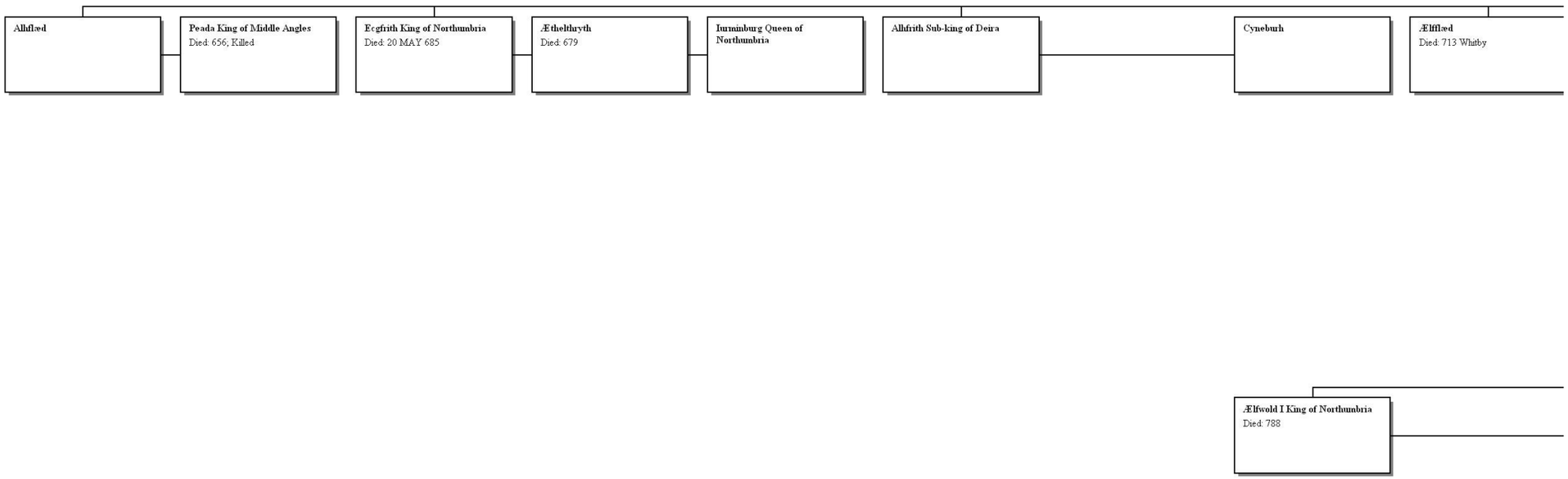


Figure 1.2 – Genealogy Chart of the Bernician Royal Family, chart 4 of 4

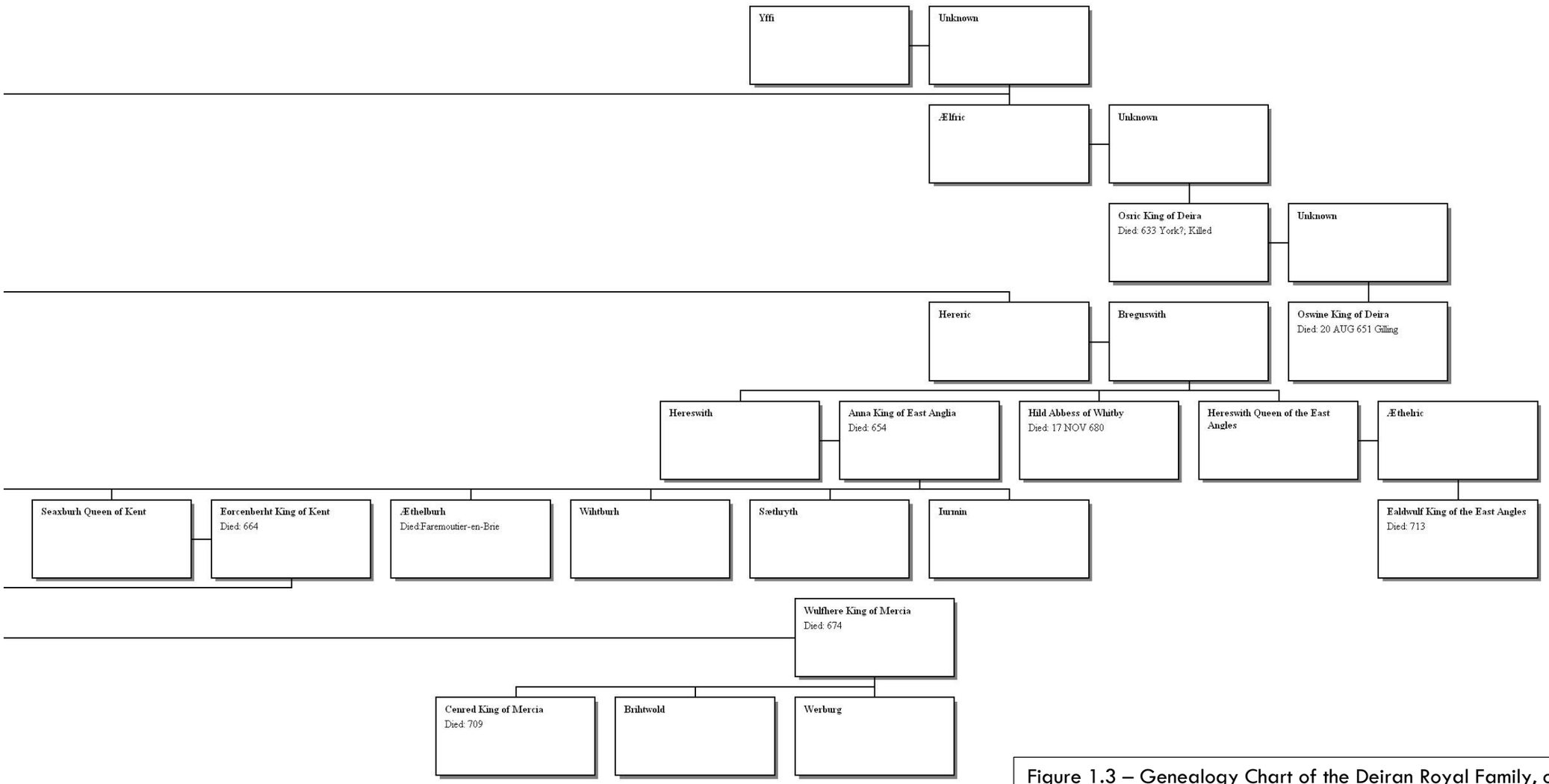


Figure 1.3 – Genealogy Chart of the Deiran Royal Family, chart 1 of 4

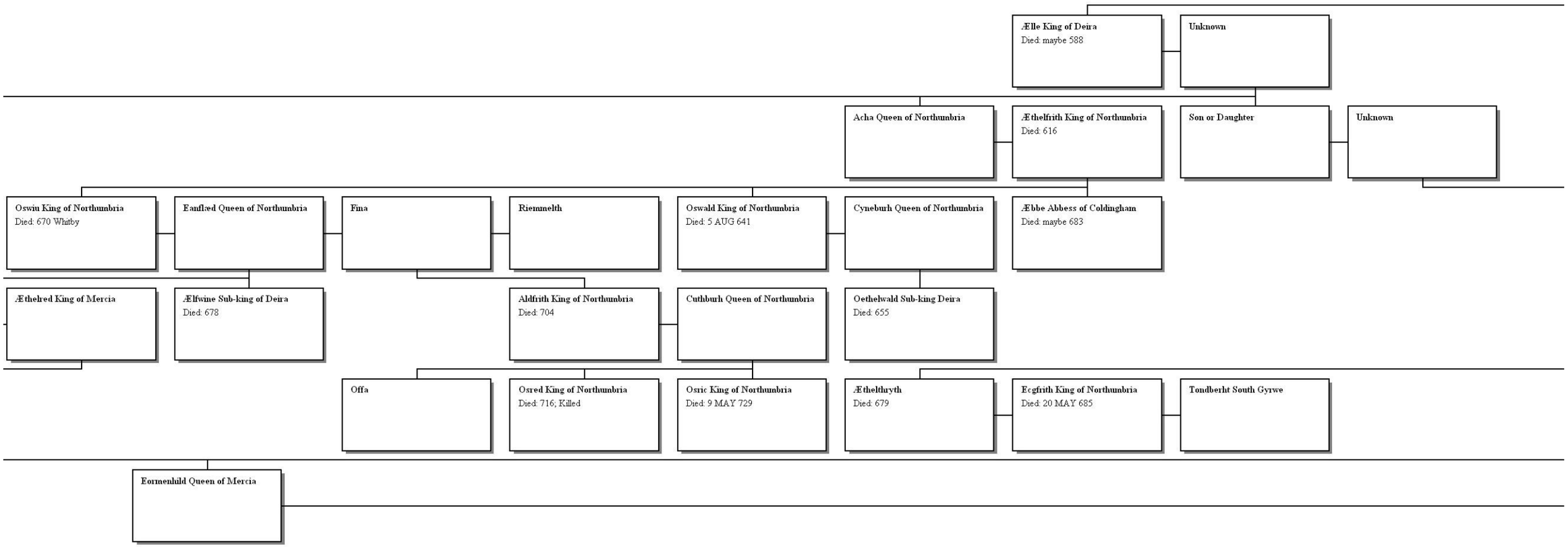


Figure 1.3 – Genealogy Chart of the Deiran Royal Family, chart 2 of 4

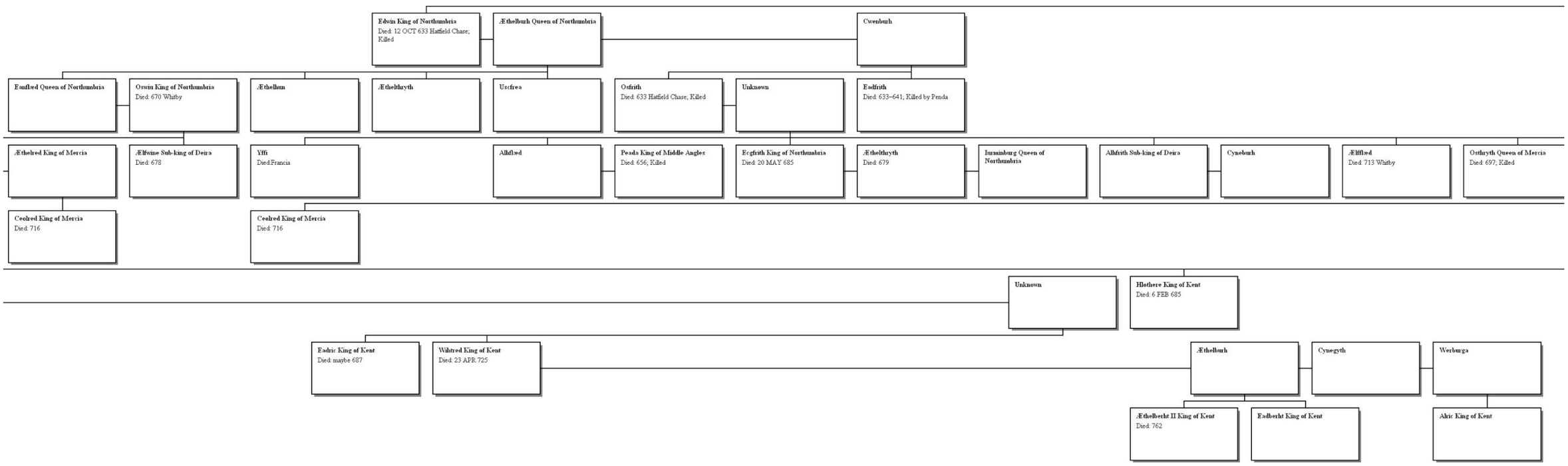


Figure 1.3 – Genealogy Chart of the Deiran Royal Family, chart 3 of 4

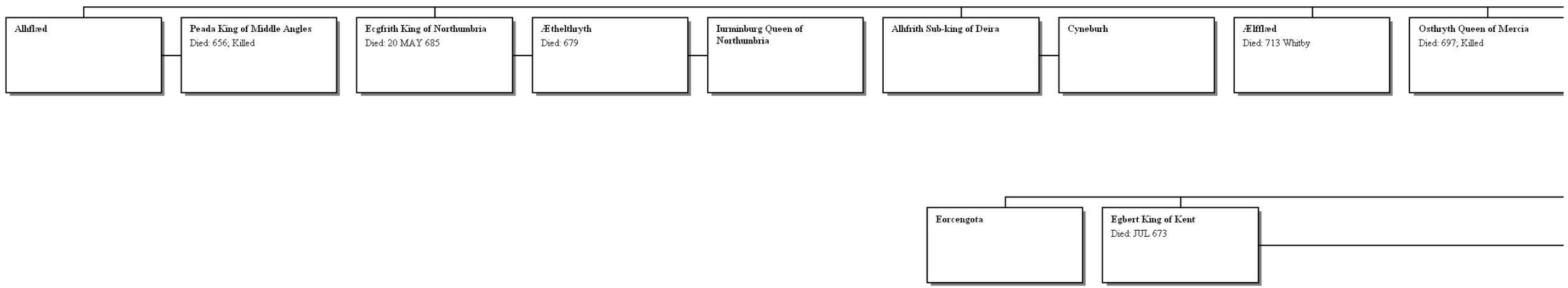


Figure 1.3 – Genealogy Chart of the Deiran Royal Family, chart 4 of 4

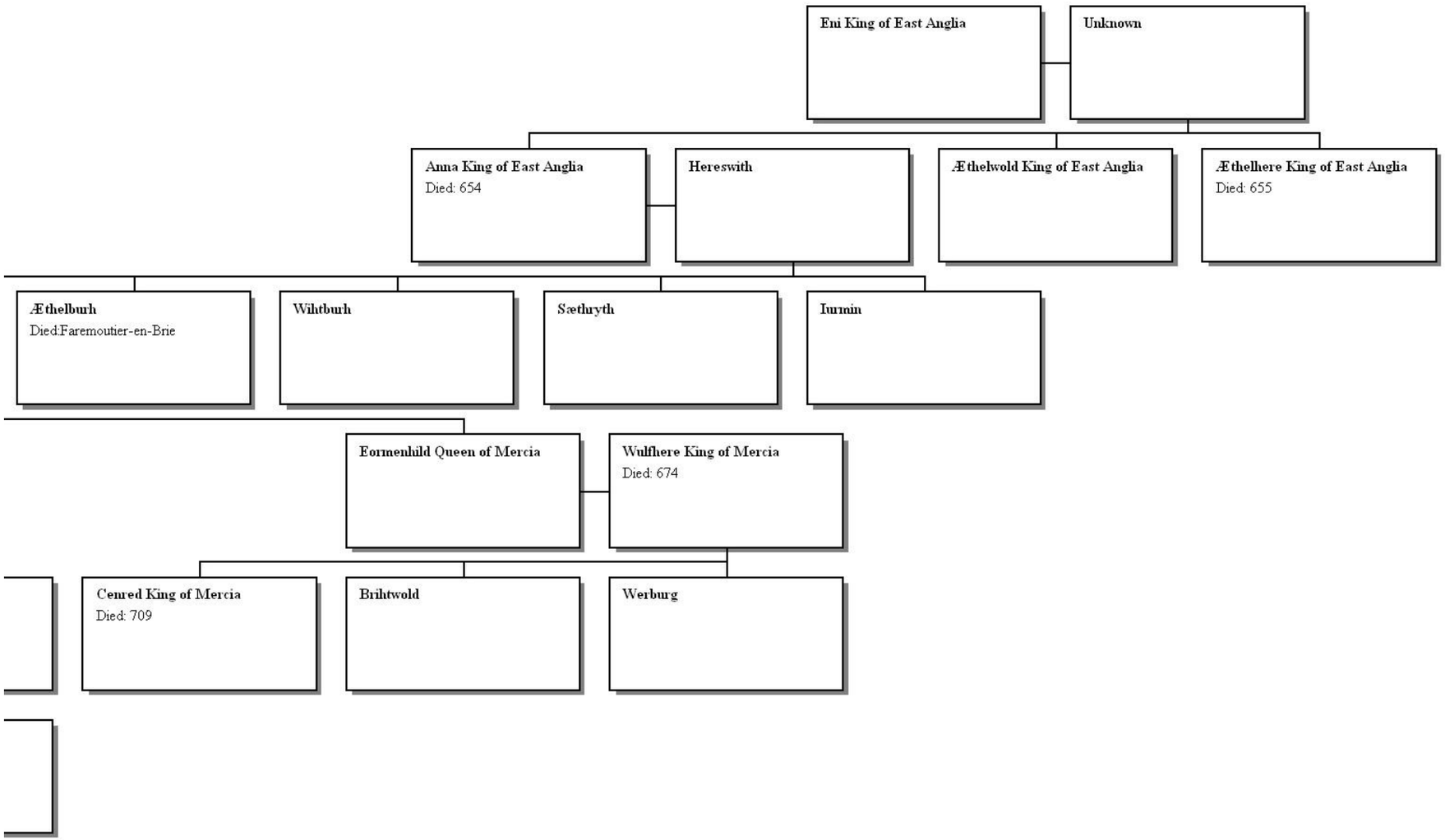


Figure 1.4 – Genealogy Chart of the East Anglian Royal Family, chart 1 of 2

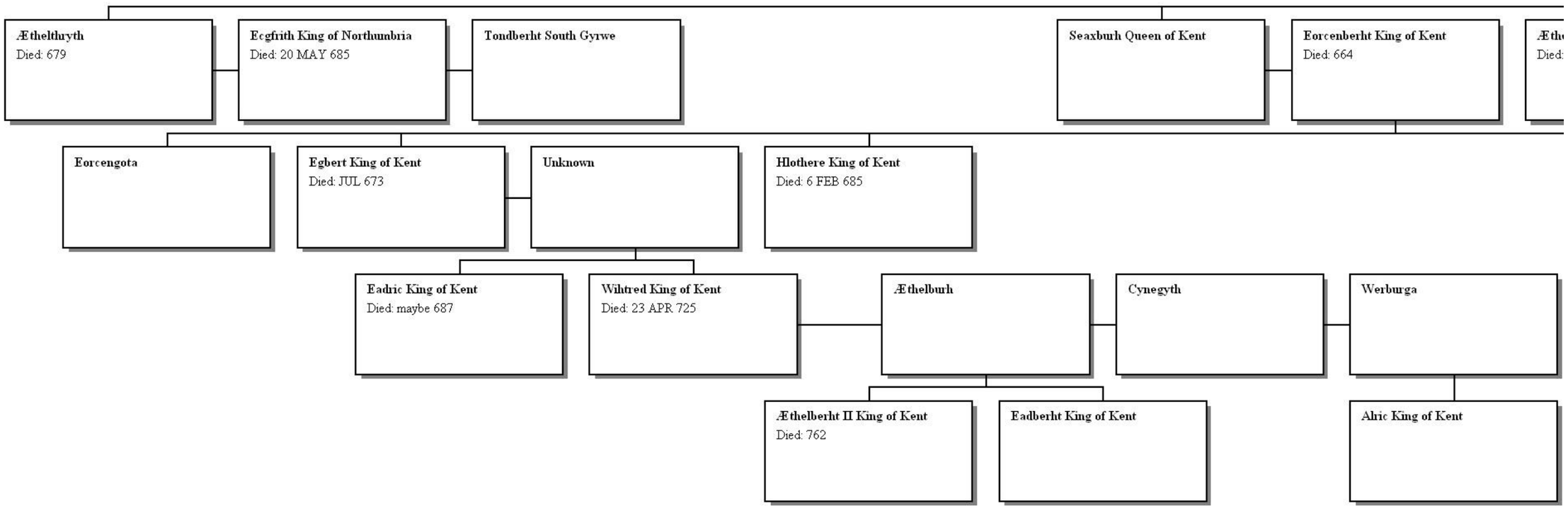


Figure 1.4 – Genealogy Chart of the East Anglian Royal Family, chart 2 of 2

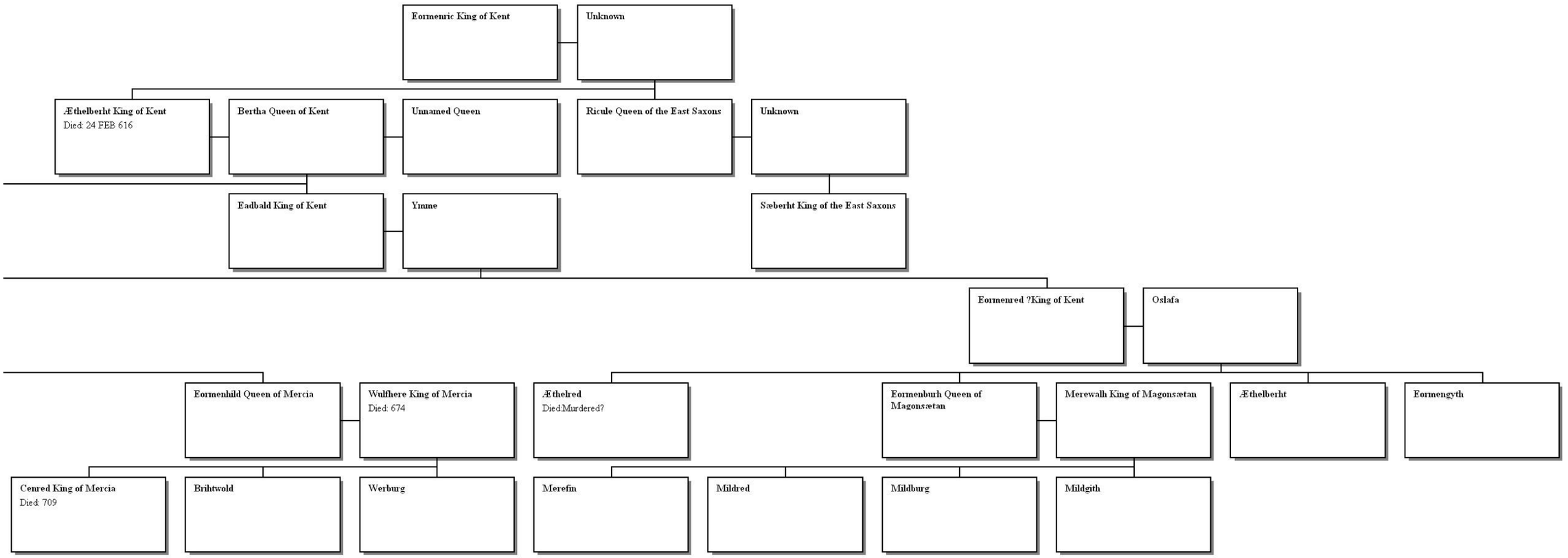


Figure 1.5 – Genealogy Chart of the Kentish Royal Family, chart 1 of 3

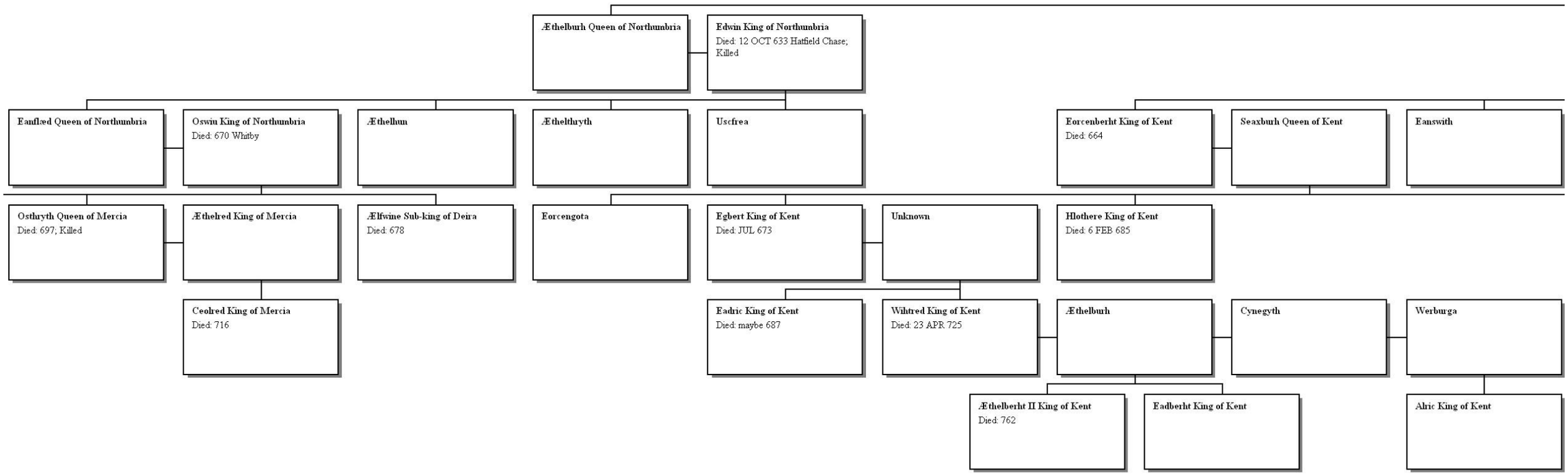


Figure 1.5 – Genealogy Chart of the Kentish Royal Family, chart 2 of 3

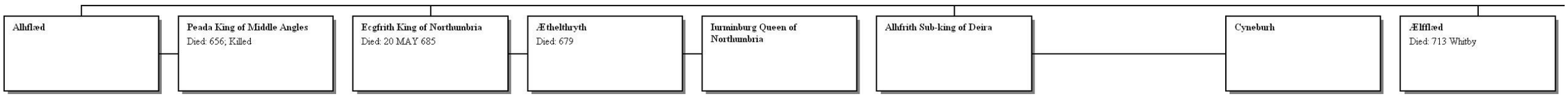


Figure 1.5 – Genealogy Chart of the Kentish Royal Family, chart 3 of 3

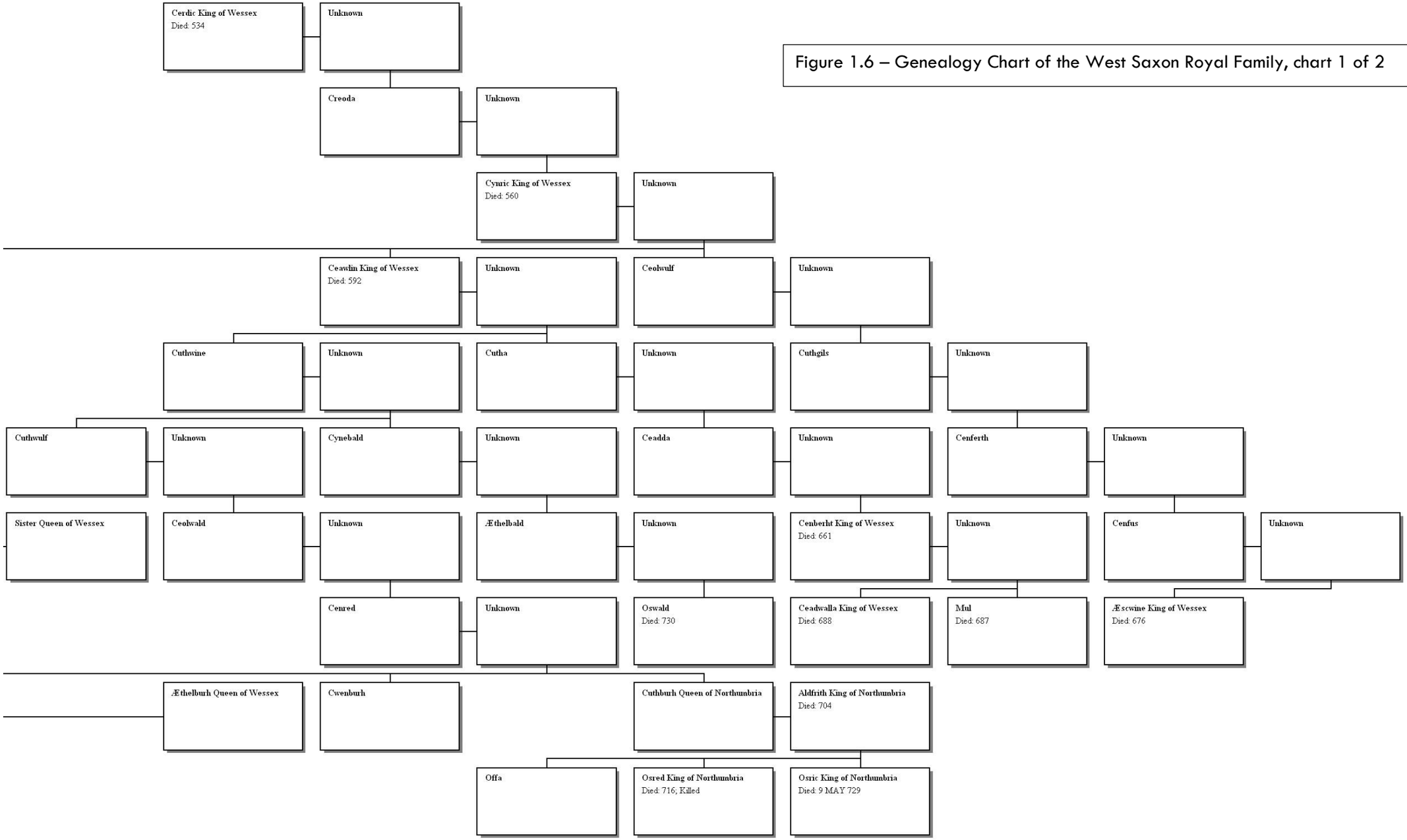
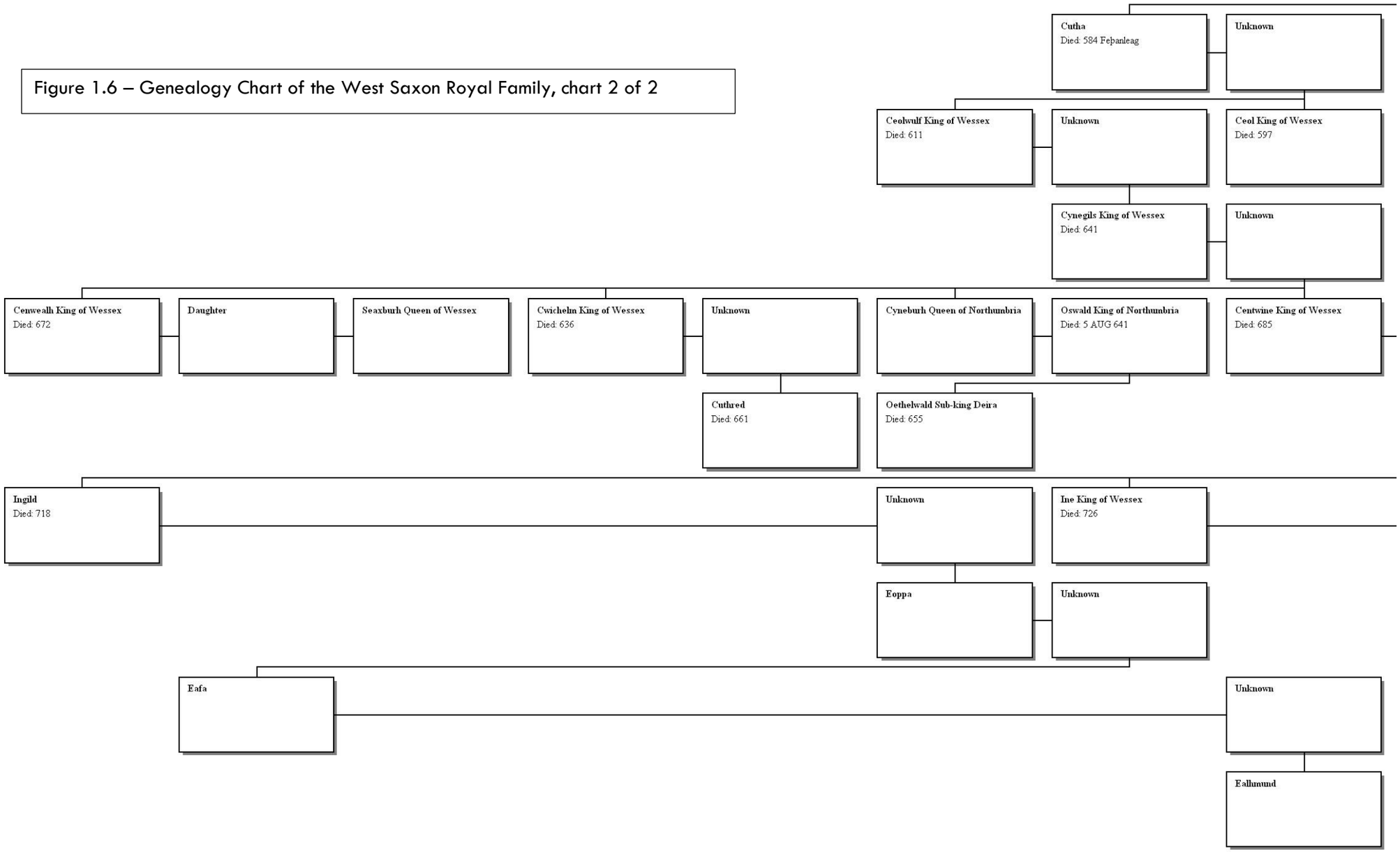


Figure 1.6 – Genealogy Chart of the West Saxon Royal Family, chart 1 of 2

Figure 1.6 – Genealogy Chart of the West Saxon Royal Family, chart 2 of 2



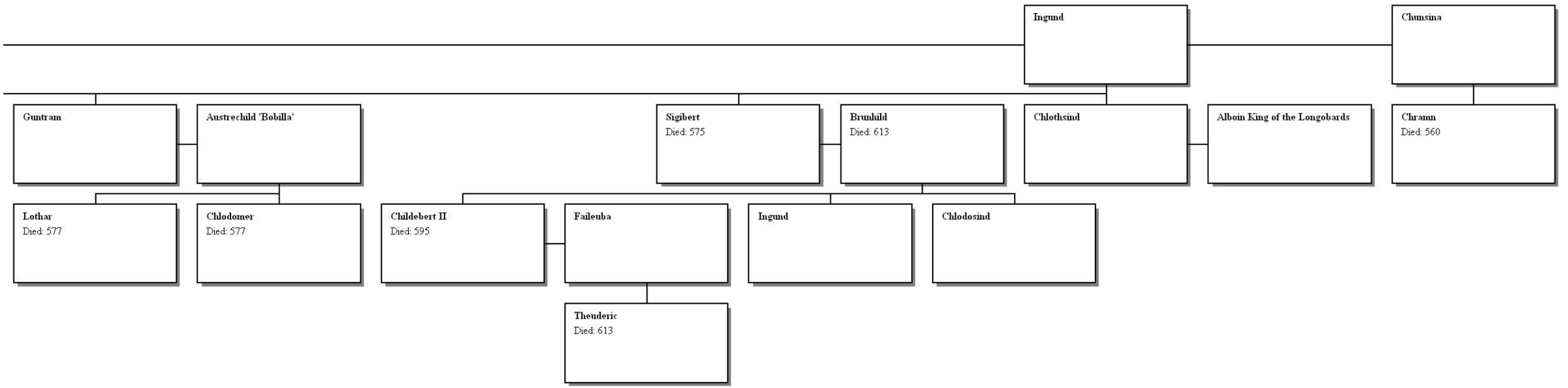


Figure 1.7 – Genealogy Chart of Queen Æthelburh's Continental Connections, chart 1 of 3

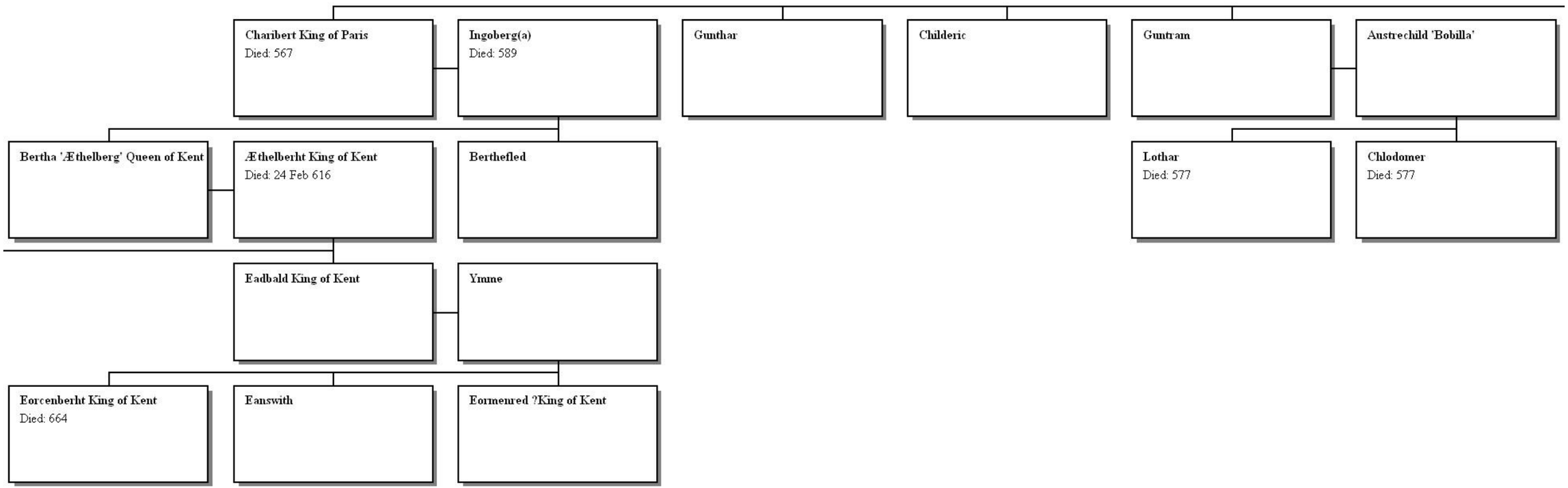


Figure 1.7 – Genealogy Chart of Queen Æthelburh's Continental Connections, chart 2 of 3

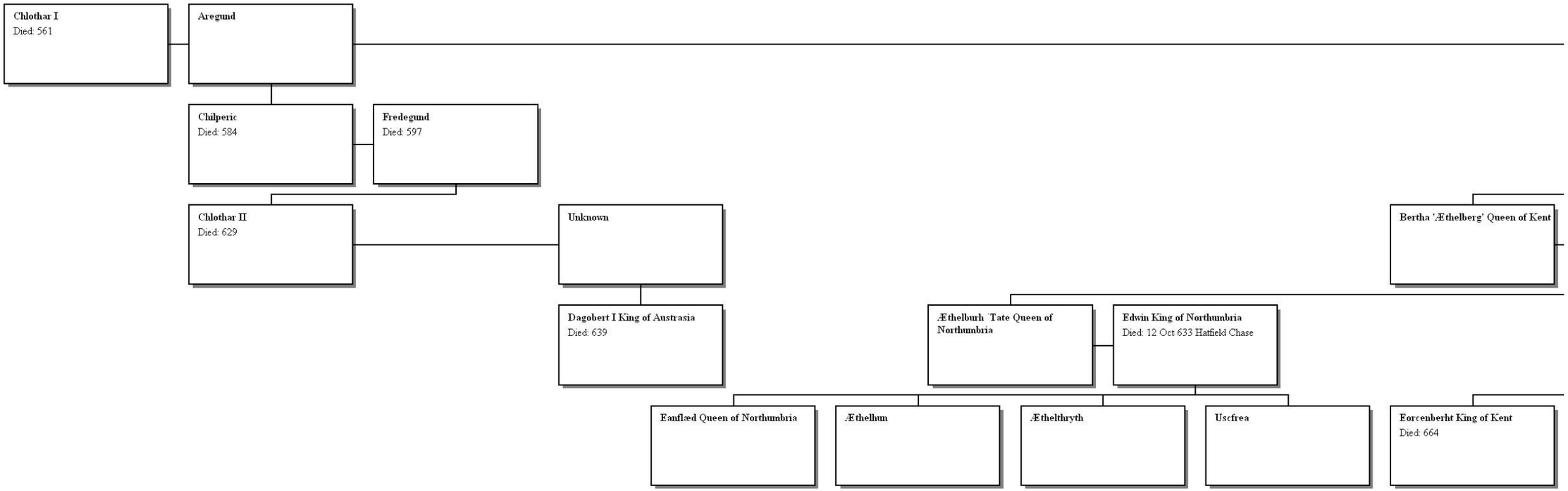


Figure 1.7 – Genealogy Chart of Queen Æthelburh's Continental Connections, chart 3 of 3

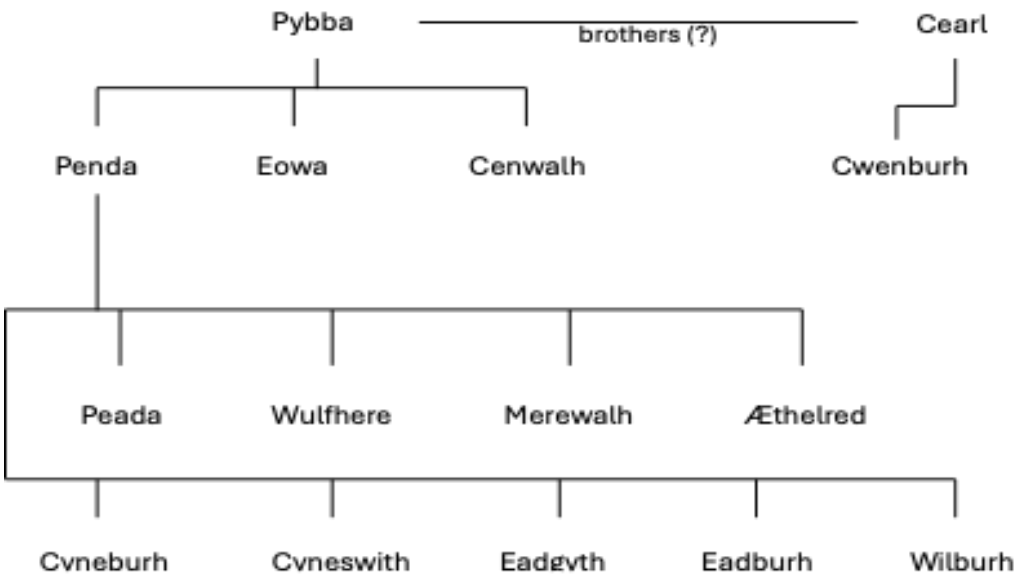


Figure 2.1 – King Penda of Mercia and his family.

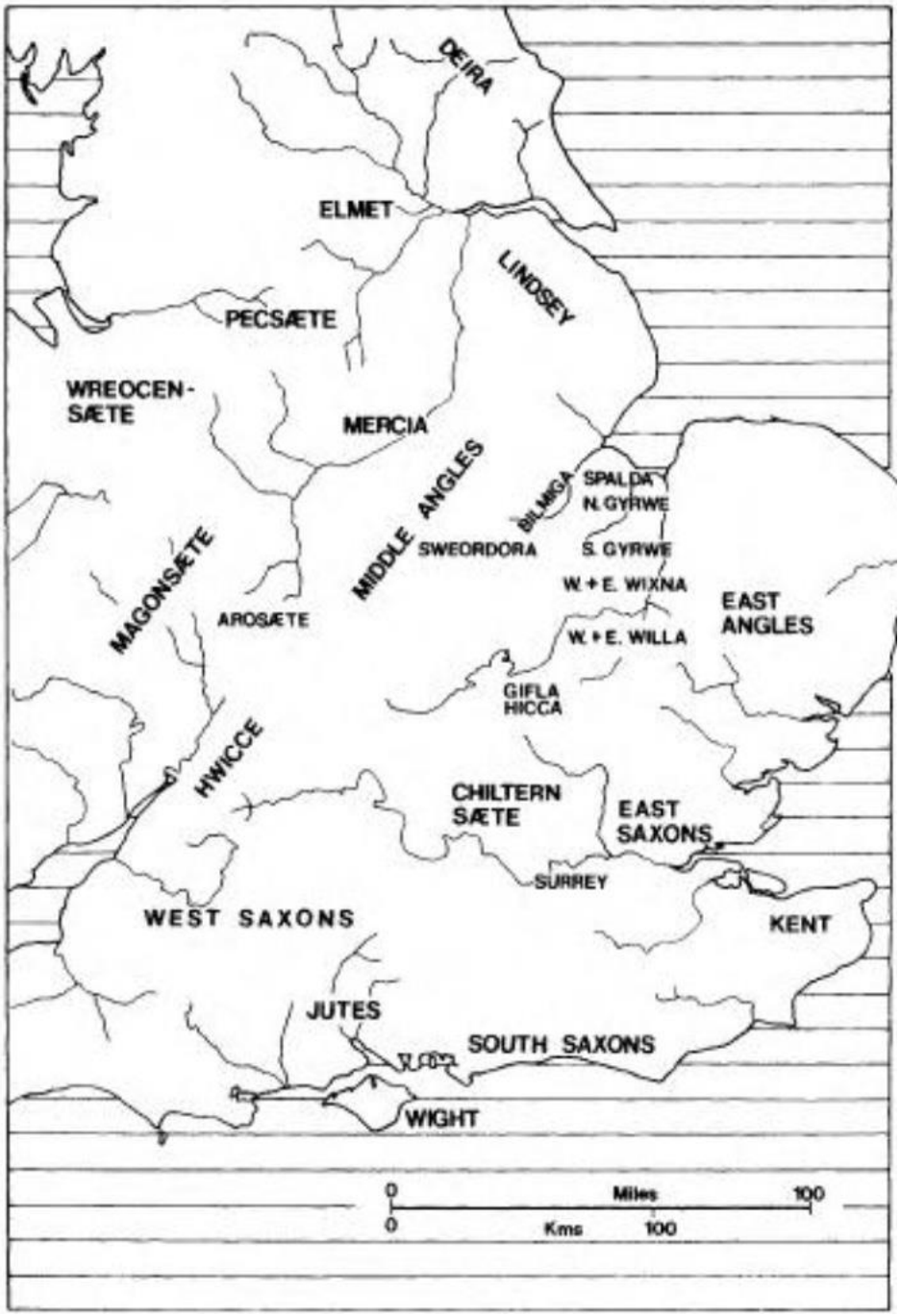


Figure 2.2 – Map of political units found in the Tribal Hidage
(From: Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Routledge, 12)

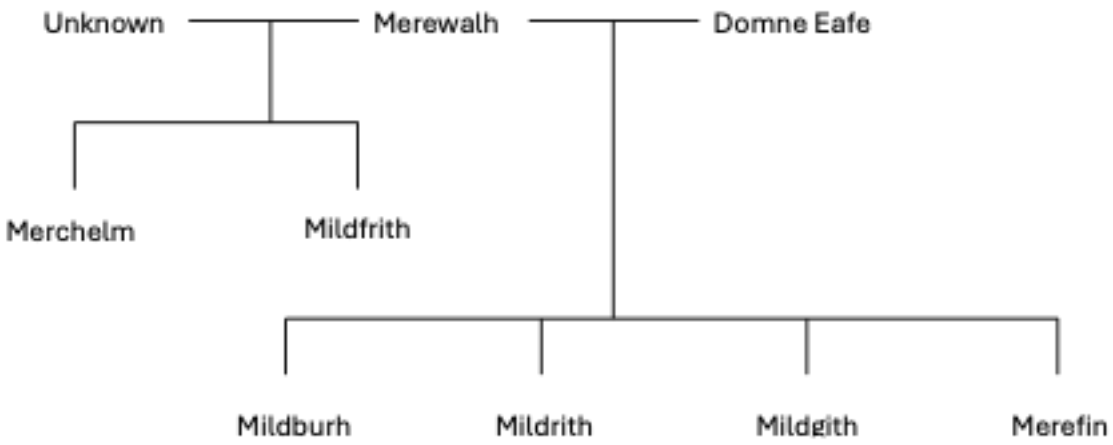


Figure 2.3 – The family of Merewalh and Domne Eafe of the Magonscete

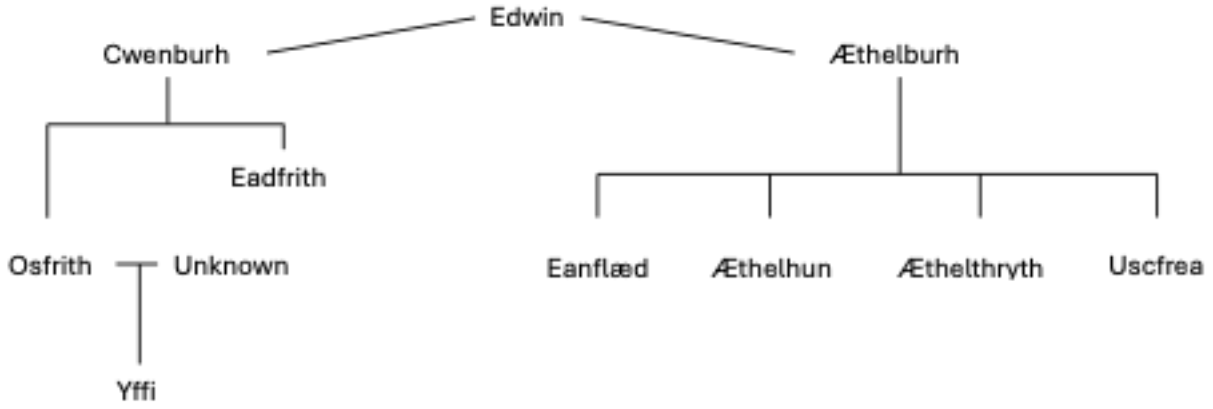


Figure 3.1 – King Edwin of Northumbria and his family

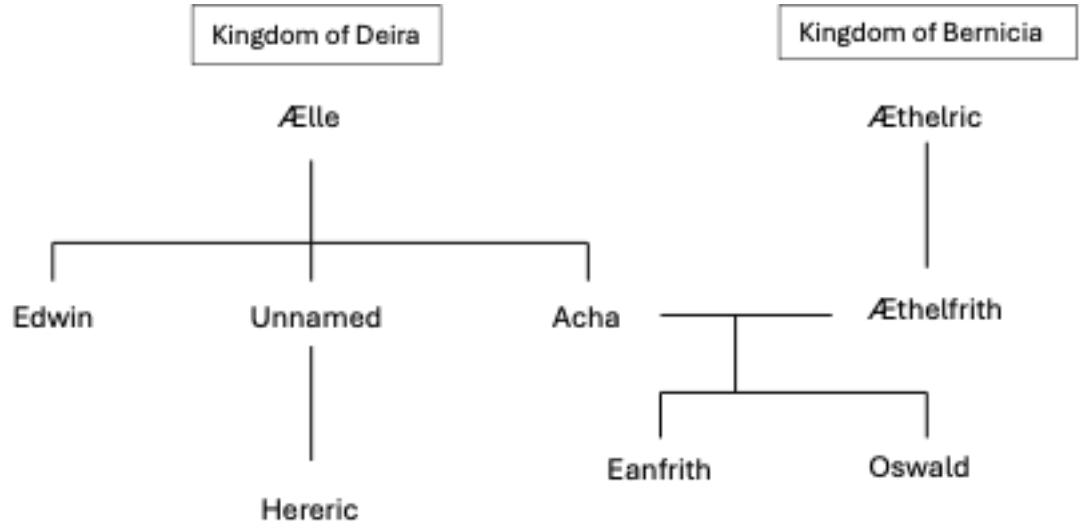


Figure 3.2 – The children of King Ælle of Northumbria

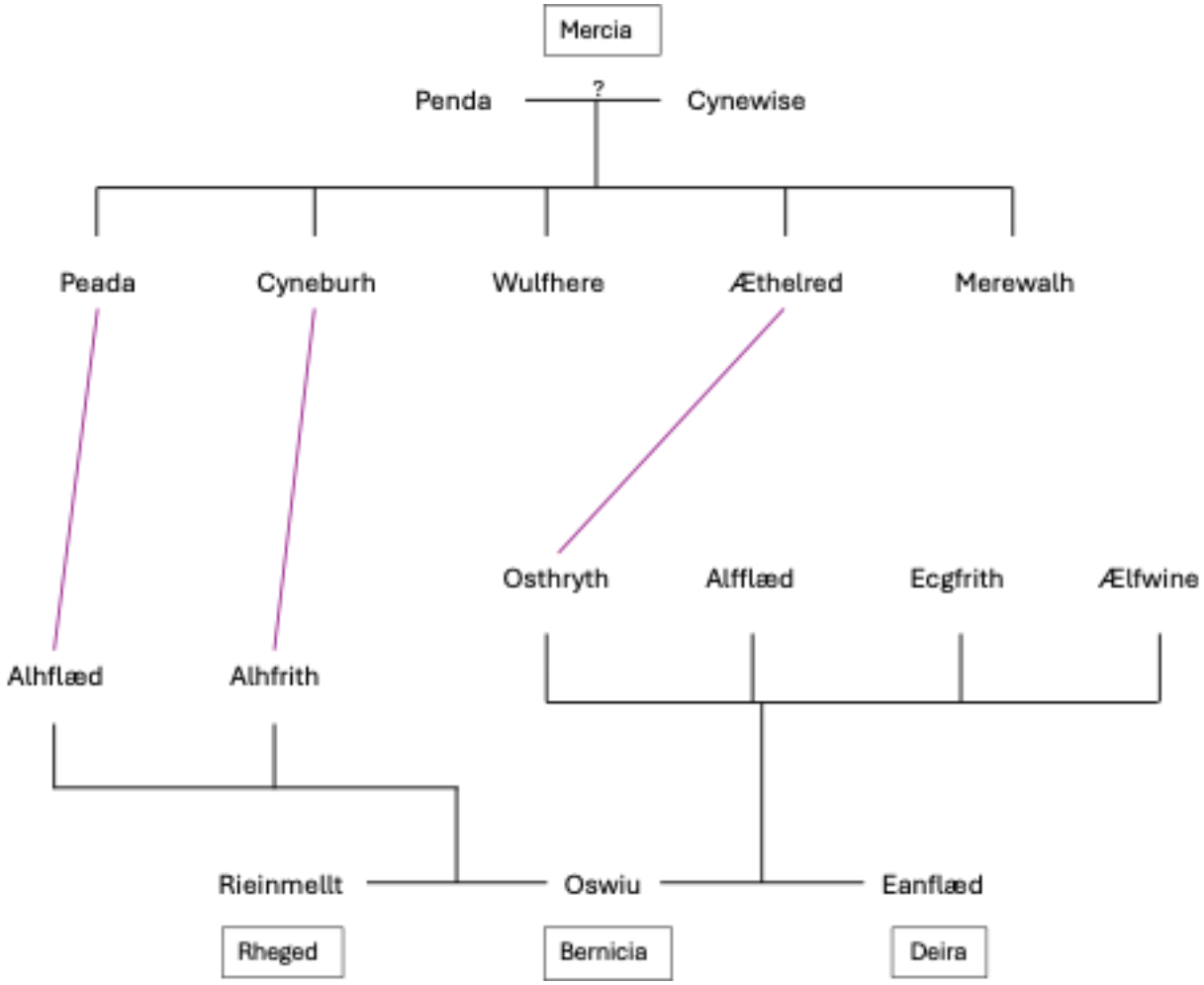


Figure 3.3 – The seventh-century marriages between Mercian and Northumbrian families

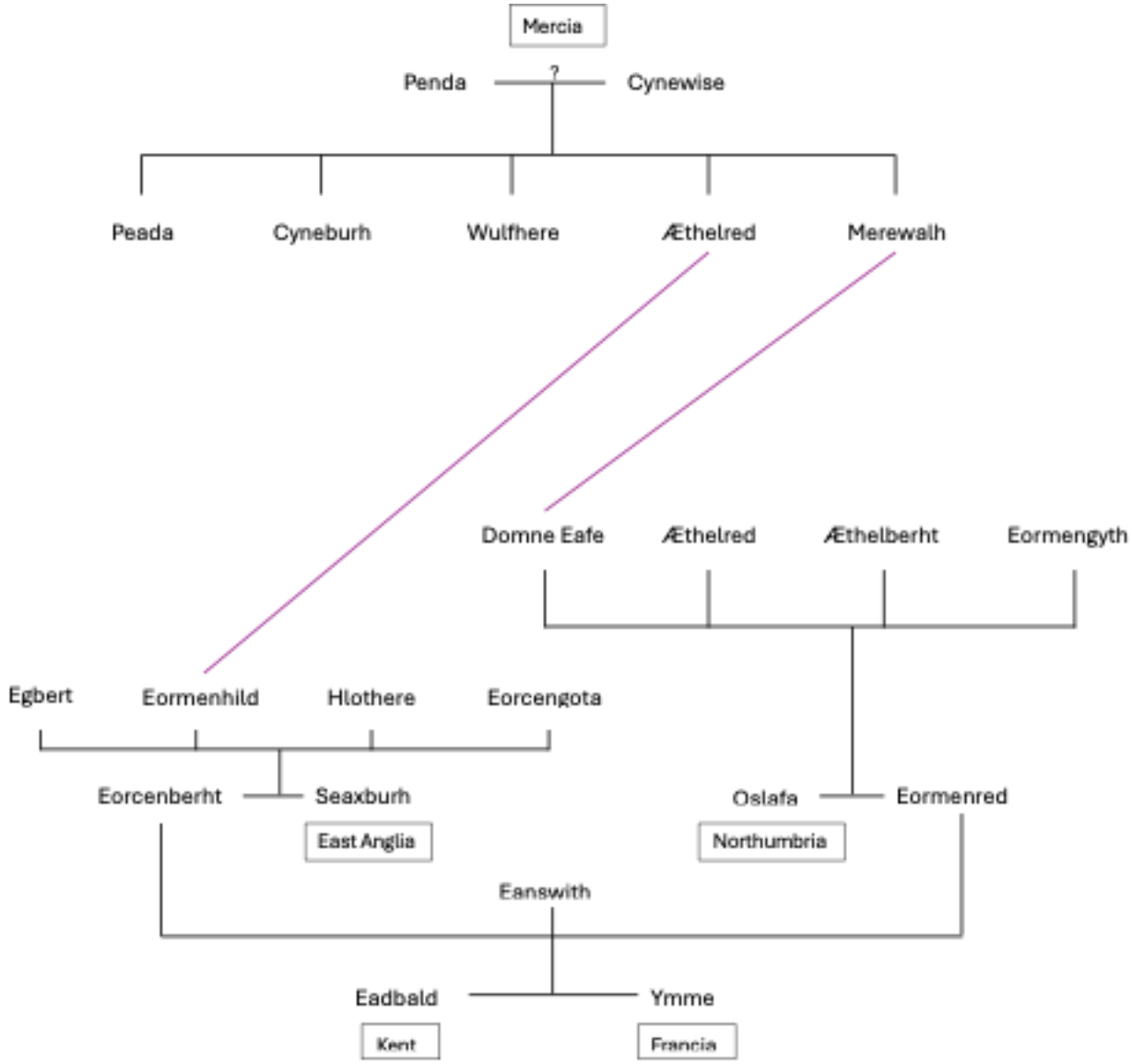


Figure 3.4 – The marriages of Merewalh and Wulfhere

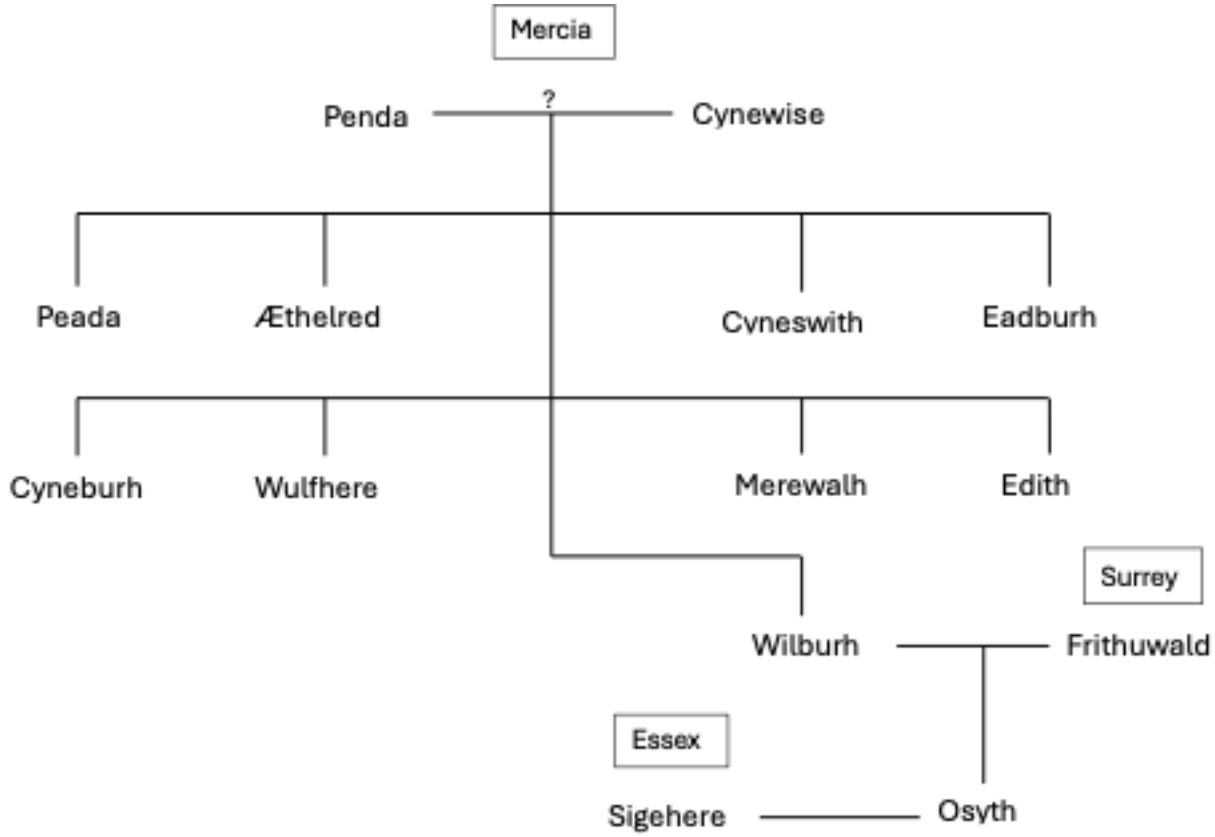


Figure 3.5 – Osyth's familial connections

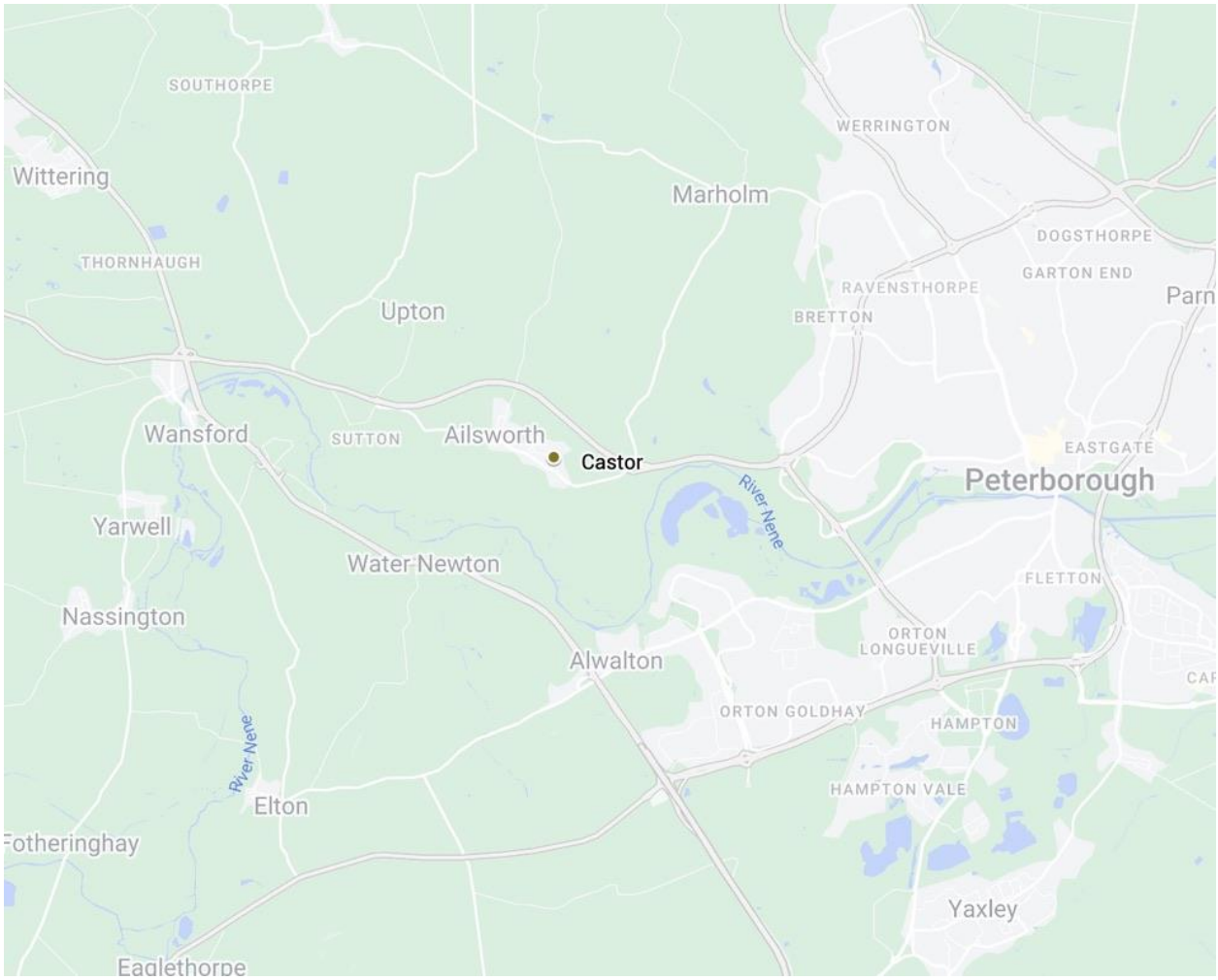


Figure 4.1 – Cyneburh's land at Castor

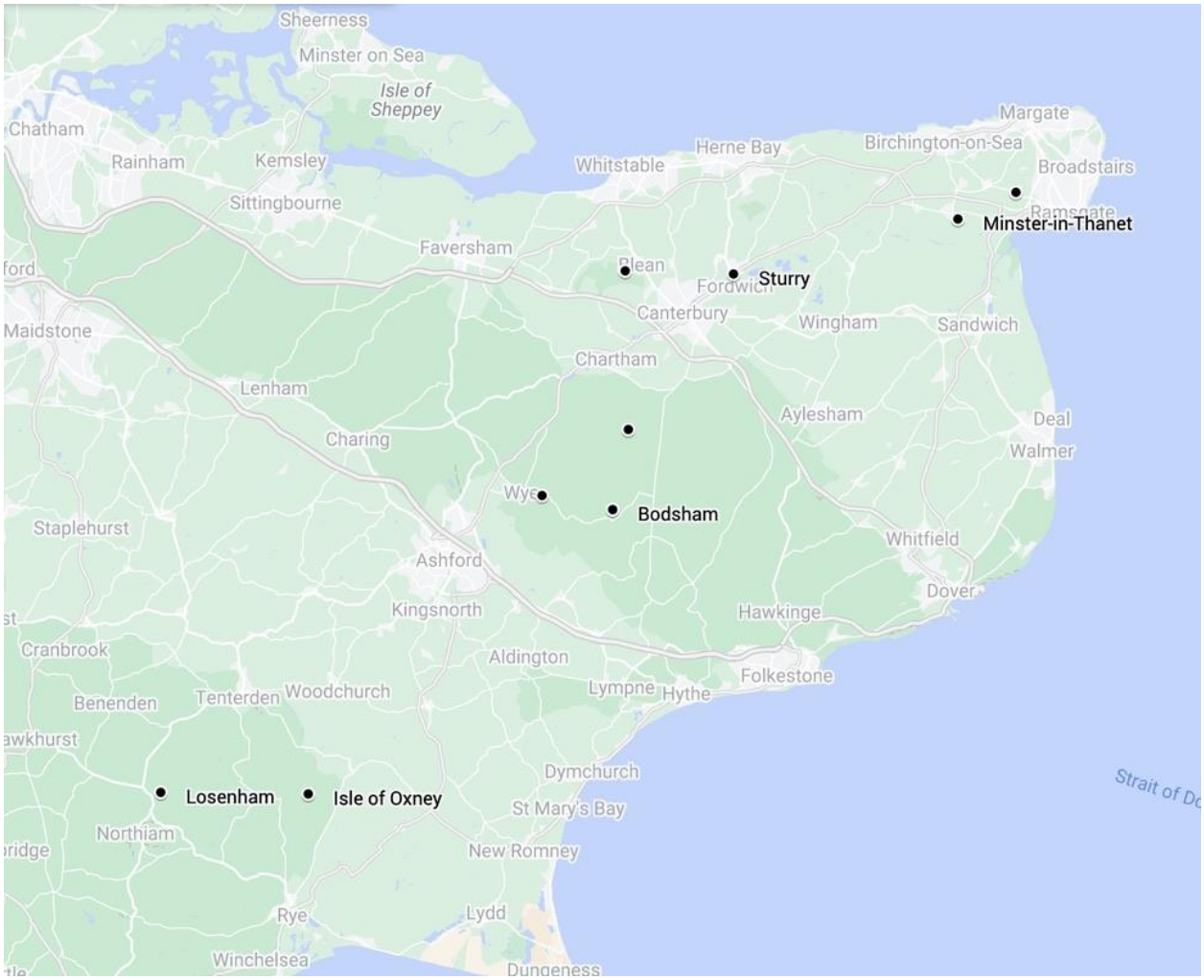


Figure 4.2 – Domne Eafe and Mildrith's lands at Minster-in-Thanet

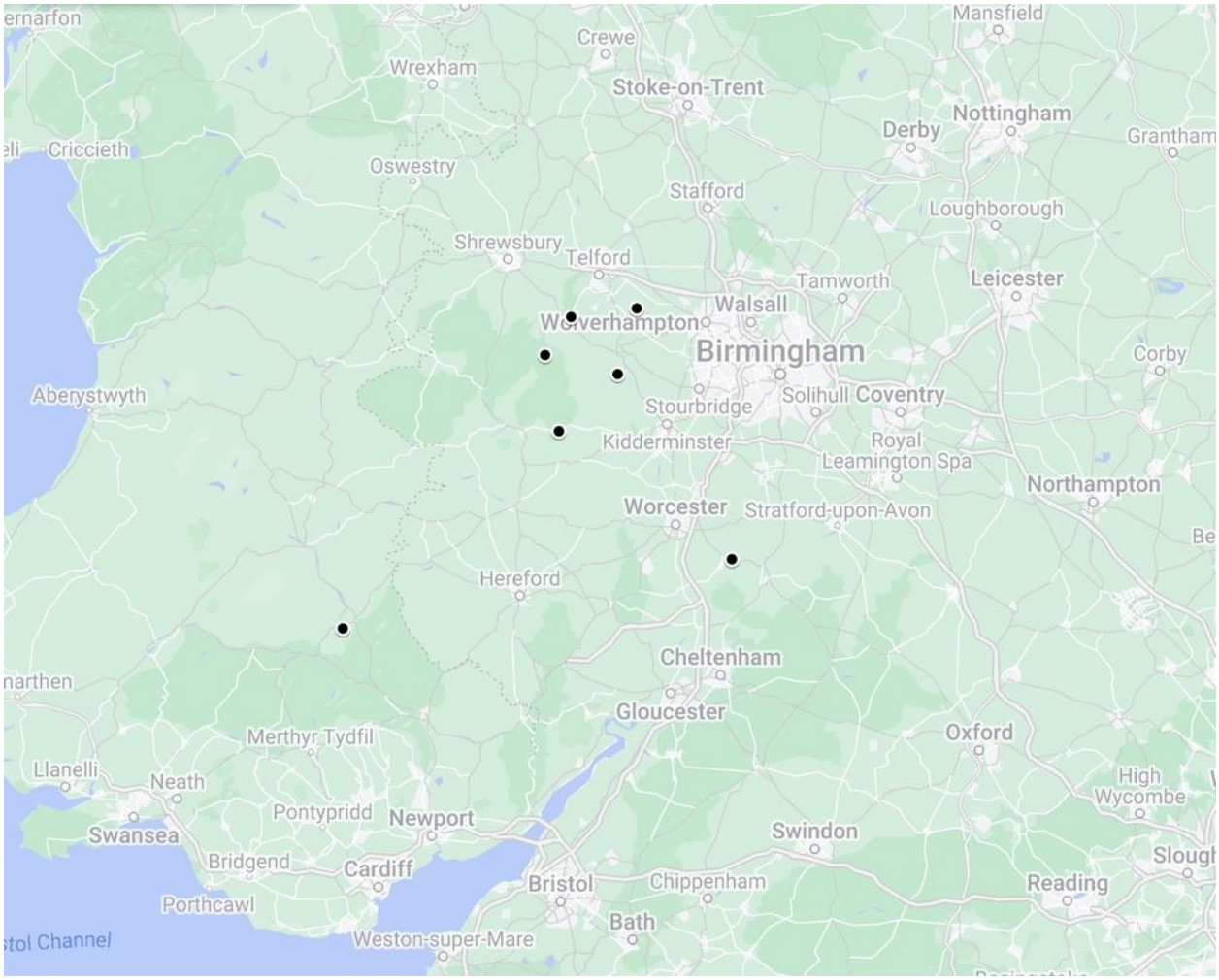


Figure 4.3 – Mildburh's estates in the Magonsæte territory and Brittonic-Wales

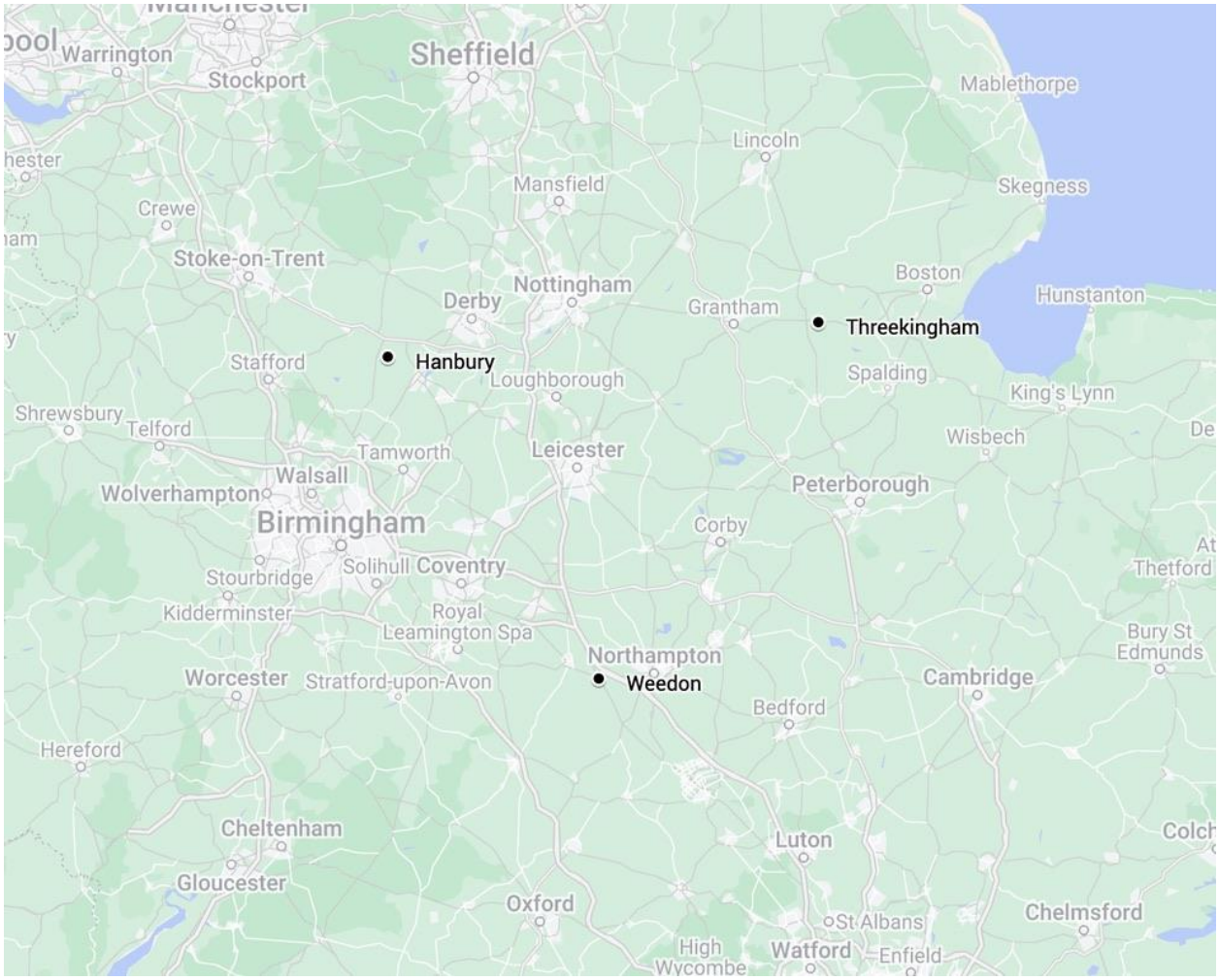


Figure 4.4 – Wærburh's three estates

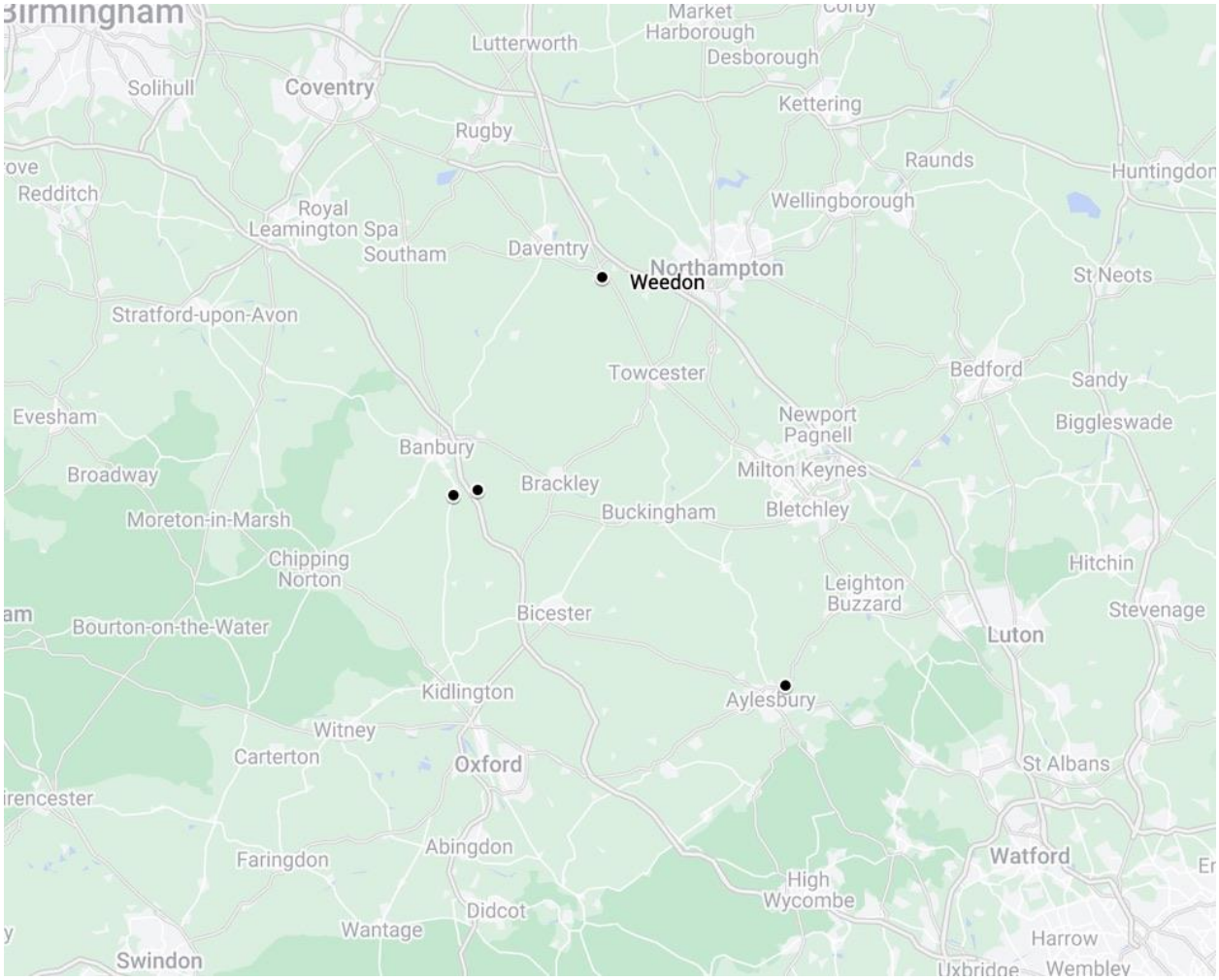


Figure 4.5 – The estate of Weedon in relation to Aylesbury, Adderbury, and King's Sutton

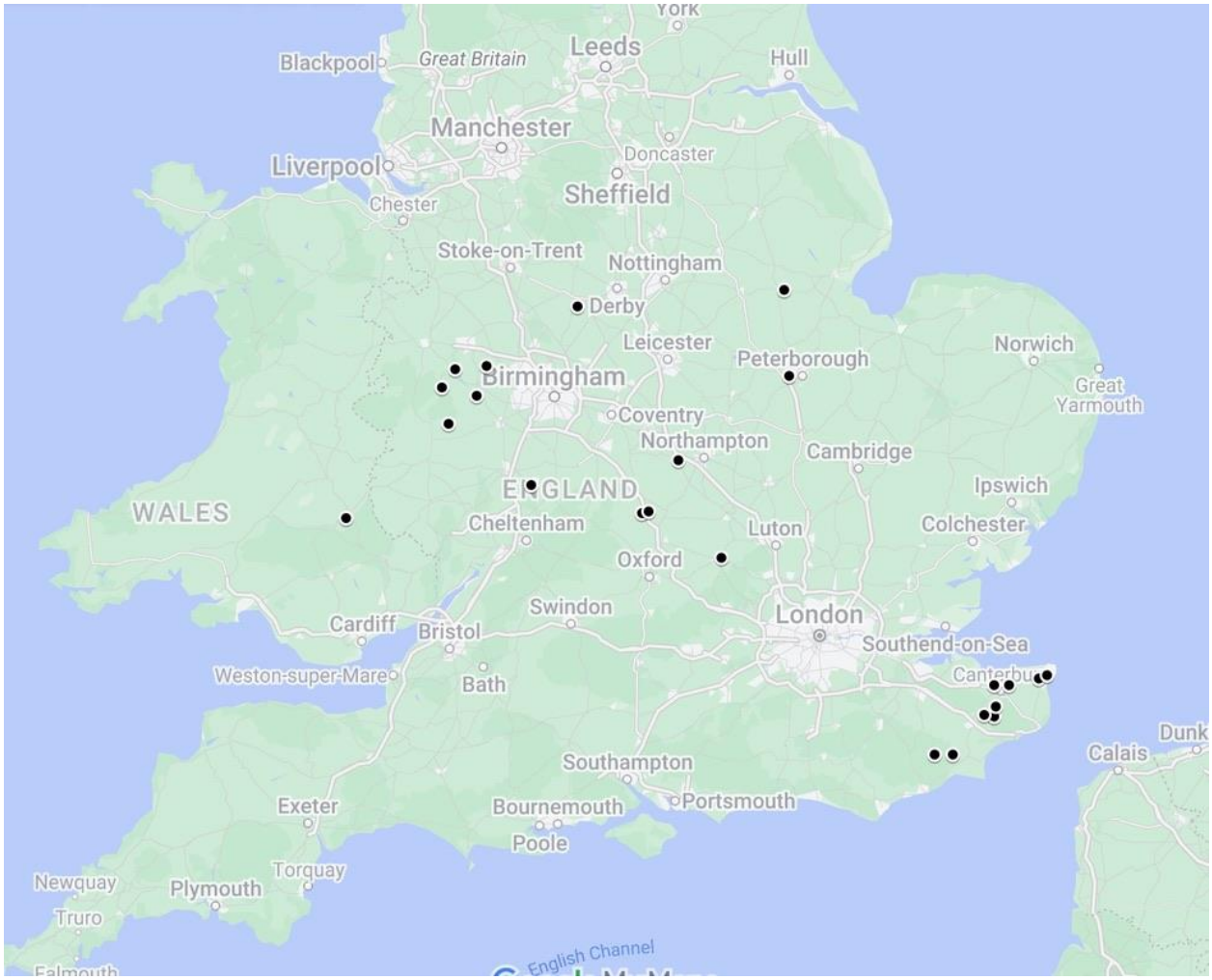


Figure 4.6 – The lands and estates of seventh-century Mercian elite women

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