

Osburh

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See also: Osburh of Coventry

Osburh or **Osburga** (died before 856) was the first wife of King Æthelwulf of Wessex and mother of Alfred the Great. Alfred's biographer, Asser, described her as "a most religious woman, noble in character and noble by birth".^[1]

Osburh's existence is known only from Asser's *Life of King Alfred*. She is not named as witness to any charters, nor is her death reported in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. So far as is known, she was the mother of all Æthelwulf's children, his five sons Æthelstan, Æthelbald, Æthelberht, Æthelred and Alfred the Great, and his daughter Æthelswith, wife of King Burgred of Mercia. Osburh presumably died before 856 when her husband married the Carolingian princess Judith.

She is best known for Asser's story about a book of Saxon songs which she showed to Alfred and his brothers, offering to give the book to whoever could first memorise it, a challenge which Alfred took up and won. This exhibits the interest of high status ninth-century women in books, and their role in educating their children.^[2]

Osburh was the daughter of Oslac (who is also only known from Asser's *Life*), King Æthelwulf's *pincerna* (butler), an important figure in the royal court and household.^[3] Oslac is described as a descendant of King Cerdic's Jutish nephews, Stuf and Wihtgar, who conquered the Isle of Wight.^[4] and, by this, is also ascribed Geatish/Gothic ancestry.

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Osburh



Queen Osburh reading to her son Alfred, illustration in M. F. Lansing, *Barbarion & Noble*, 1911

Queen consort of Wessex

Successor Judith of Flanders

Spouse Æthelwulf, King of Wessex

Issue

Æthelstan of Wessex

Æthelswith, Queen of Mercia

Æthelbald, King of Wessex

Æthelbert, King of Wessex

Æthelred, King of Wessex

Alfred, King of Wessex

Father Oslac

Died before 856

Issue

Name	Birth	Death	Notes
Æthelstan		851–855	
Æthelswith		888	Married, Burgred of Mercia; no issue

Æthelbald		860	Married, Judith; annulled
Æthelbert		865	
Æthelred		871	Had issue
Alfred	849	26 October 899	Married 868, Ealhswith; had issue

See also

- House of Wessex family tree

Notes

- [^] Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge eds, *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, London, Penguin Classics, 1983, p. 68
- [^] Janet L. Nelson, Osburh, 2004, Oxford Online Dictionary of National Biography (<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20887>) In Nelson's view, Osburh may have been dead by 856 or may have been repudiated.
- [^] Keynes and Lapidge, pp. 68, 229.
- [^] Asser states that Oslac was a Goth, but this is regarded by historians as an error as Stuf and Wightgar were Jutes. Keynes and Lapidge pp. 229-30 and Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 3rd edition 1971, p. 23-4

References

- Asser's Life of King Alfred (<http://omacl.org/KingAlfred/>)
- Lees, Clare A. & Gillian R. Overing (eds), *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2001. ISBN 0-8122-3628-9

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