

Æthelwulf of Wessex

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Æthelwulf, also spelled **Aethelwulf** or **Ethelwulf**; Old English: *Æpelwulf*, meaning "Noble Wolf", was King of Wessex from 839 until his death in 858. He was the only known child of King Egbert of Wessex.^[1] He conquered the kingdom of Kent on behalf of his father in 825, and was sometime later made King of Kent ^[2] as a sub-king to Egbert. He succeeded his father as King of Wessex on Egbert's death in 839, at which time his kingdom stretched from the county of Kent in the east to Devon in the west. At the same time his eldest son Æthelstan became sub-king of Kent as a subordinate ruler.

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Rule

Historians give conflicting assessments of Æthelwulf. According to Richard Humble, Æthelwulf had a worrying style of Kingship. He had come to the throne of Wessex by inheritance. He proved to be intensely religious, cursed with little political sense, and with too many able and ambitious sons.^[3] To Frank Stenton, "Æthelwulf seems to have been a religious and unambitious man, for whom engagement in war and politics was an unwelcome consequence of rank."^[4] However, Janet Nelson thought that his reign has been underappreciated in modern scholarship, and that he laid the foundations for Alfred's success, finding new as well as traditional answers, and coping more effectively with Scandinavian attacks than most contemporary rulers.^[1] In Simon Keynes's view, "it was he, more than any other, who secured the political fortune of his people in the 9th

Æthelwulf



Depiction of Æthelwulf from the *Genealogical Chronicle of the English Kings*, a late-13th-century manuscript in the British Library.

King of Wessex

Reign 839–858

Predecessor Egbert

Successor Æthelbald

Spouse Osburh
Judith of Flanders

Issue

Æthelstan of Wessex

Æthelswith, Queen of Mercia

Æthelbald, King of Wessex

Æthelberht, King of Wessex

Æthelred, King of Wessex

Alfred, King of Wessex

House House of Wessex

Father Egbert, King of Wessex

Died 13 January 858

Burial Steyning then the Old Minster,
Winchester. Remains now in
Winchester Cathedral

century, and who opened up channels of communication which led through the Frankish realms and across the Alps to Rome."^[5]

Martial career

The most notable and commonly used primary source is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which refers to Æthelwulf's presence at some important battles. In 840, he fought at Carhampton against 35 ship companies of Danes, whose raids had increased considerably. His most notable victory came in 851 at "Acleah", possibly Ockley in Surrey or Oakley in Berkshire. Here, Æthelwulf and his son Æthelbald fought against the heathen, and according to the chronicle it was "the greatest slaughter of heathen host ever made." Around 853, Æthelwulf and his son-in-law, Burgred, King of Mercia, defeated Cyngen ap Cadell of Wales and made the Welsh subject to him. The chronicle depicts more battles throughout the years, mostly against invading pirates and Danes. This was an era in European history when nations were being invaded by many different groups;

there were Saracens in the south, Magyars in the east, Moors in the west, and Vikings in the north.^[6] Before Æthelwulf's death, raiders had wintered on the Isle of Sheppey and pillaged at will in East Anglia. Over the course of the next 20 years the struggles of his sons were to be "ceaseless, heroic, and largely futile."^[7]

Family life

One of the first of Æthelwulf's acts as king was to split the kingdom. He gave the eastern half, including Kent, Essex, Surrey, and Sussex, to his eldest son Æthelstan (not to be confused with the later Athelstan the Glorious). Æthelwulf kept the ancient, western side of Wessex (Hampshire, Wiltshire, Dorset, and Devon) for himself.

Æthelwulf and his first wife, Osburh, had five sons and a daughter. After Æthelstan came Æthelbald, Æthelbert, Æthelred, and Alfred. Each of his sons, with the exception of Æthelstan, succeeded to the throne. Alfred, the youngest, has been praised as one of the greatest kings to ever reign in Britain. Æthelwulf's only daughter, Æthelswith, was married as a child to King Burgred of Mercia.

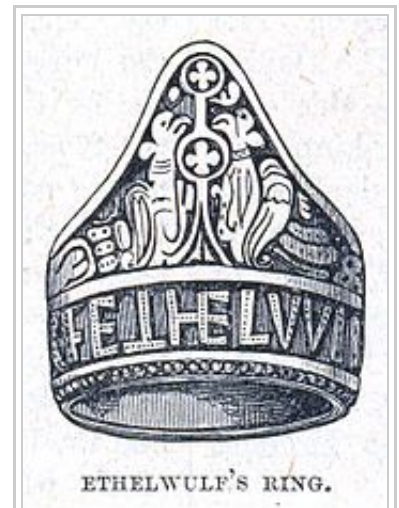
Pilgrimage to Rome, marriage, conspiracy of Æthelbald, death

Religion was always an important part of Æthelwulf's life. As early as the first year of his reign he planned a pilgrimage to Rome. Due to the ongoing and increasing raids he felt the need to appeal to the Christian God for help against an enemy "so agile, and numerous, and profane."^[3]

In 853, Æthelwulf sent his son Alfred, a child of about four years, to Rome. In 855, about a year after the death of his wife Osburga, Æthelwulf followed Alfred to Rome, where he was generous with his wealth. He distributed gold to the clergy of St. Peter's and offered them chalices of the purest gold and silver-gilt



Depiction of Æthelwulf by an unknown 18th-century artist



Æthelwulf's ring, measuring about an inch across, richly decorated with religious symbols, and inscribed *Æthelwulf Rex*.^[8]

candelabra of Saxon work.^[9] During the return journey in 856 he married Judith, a Frankish princess and a great-granddaughter of Charlemagne. She was about 12 years old, the daughter of Charles the Bald, King of the West Franks.

Upon their return to England in 856 Æthelwulf met with an acute crisis. His eldest surviving son Æthelbald (Athelstan had since died) had devised a conspiracy with the Ealdorman of Somerset and the Bishop of Sherborne to oppose Æthelwulf's resumption of the kingship on his return. While Æthelwulf was able to muster enough support to fight a civil war or to banish Æthelbald and his fellow conspirators, he instead chose to yield western Wessex to his son, while he himself retained central and eastern Wessex. The absence of coins in Æthelbald's name suggests that West Saxon coinage was in Æthelwulf's name until his death. He ruled there until his death on 13 January 858.

That the king should have consented to treat with his rebellious son, to refer the compromise to a meeting of Saxon nobles, to moderate the pugnacity of his own supporters, and to resign the rule over the more important half of his dominions – all this testifies to the fact that Æthelwulf's Christian spirit did not exhaust itself in the giving of lavish charities to the Church, but availed to reconcile him to the sacrifice of prestige and power in the cause of national peace.^[10]

The restoration of Æthelwulf included a special concession on behalf of Saxon queens. The West Saxons previously did not allow the queen to sit next to the king. In fact they were referred to not as a queen but merely as the "wife of the king." This restriction was lifted for Queen Judith, probably because she was a high-ranking European princess.

He was buried first at Steyning and later re-interred in the Old Minster in Winchester. His bones now rest in one of several "mortuary chests" in Winchester Cathedral.



Æthelwulf's first tombstone, in the church porch at Steyning; the two incised crosses indicate a royal burial

Issue

Æthelwulf was first married to Osburh, daughter of Oslac. They had six children, four of whom became kings of Wessex.

Name	Birth	Death	Notes
Æthelstan ^[11]		c. 852 ^[12]	Eldest son. Did not rule.
Æthelswith		888	Only daughter. Married Burgred of Mercia.
Æthelbald		20 December 860	Son. Married 858, Judith of Flanders, his father's widow. Ruled 858–860.
Æthelbert		865	Son. Ruled 860–865.
Æthelred	c. 848 ^[13]	23 April 871	Son. Married. Two known children. Ruled 865–871.
Alfred	c. 849	26 October 899	Son. Married 868, Ealhswith. Six known children. Ruled 871–899.

Æthelwulf was married a second time to Judith of Flanders, aged about 12,^[1] with whom he had no issue.

See also

- House of Wessex family tree
- List of monarchs of Kent
- List of monarchs of Wessex
- Burial places of British royalty

Notes

- [^] ^{*a b c*} Janet L. Nelson, Æthelwulf, Oxford Online Dictionary of National Biography, 2004 (<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8921?docPos=1>)
- [^] "S 282" (<http://www.anglo-saxons.net/hwaet/?do=seek&query=S+282>). Anglo-saxons.net. Retrieved 2012-02-04.
- [^] ^{*a b*} Humble, Richard. *The Saxon Kings*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980. 41.
- [^] Stenton, p. 245.
- [^] Simon Keynes, introduction to Peter Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, Cambridge University Press, 3rd Edition, 2003, p. xxxiii
- [^] Ashley, Maurice. *Great Britain to 1688: A Modern History*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961. 34.
- [^] Hindley, Geoffrey. *The Anglo-Saxons*. London: Robinson, 2006. 186
- [^] Depicted in *Cassell's History of England, Century Edition*, published circa 1902. The ring was found at Laverstock, Wiltshire, in 1780, and is believed to have been a gift from Æthelwulf to a loyal follower.
- [^] Hodgkin, RH. *A History of the Anglo-Saxons*. London: Oxford UP, 1935. 512.
- [^] Hodgkin, RH. *A History of the Anglo-Saxons*. London: Oxford UP, 1935. 515.
- [^] Stenton, p. 236 n.
- [^] Williams, 'Athelstan'
- [^] Miller, Æthelred

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Regnal titles		
Preceded by Egbert	King of Wessex 839–858	Succeeded by Æthelbald
	King of Kent 839–858	

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| 9th-century English monarchs

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