

Cerdic of Wessex

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See also Ceretic (disambiguation) for two kings with a similar name.

Cerdic was probably the first King of Anglo-Saxon Wessex from 519 to 534, cited by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as the founder of the kingdom of Wessex and ancestor of all its subsequent kings. (See House of Wessex family tree).

Contents

- 1 Life
- 2 Origins
- 3 Modern times
- 4 References
- 5 External links

Life

According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Cerdic landed in Hampshire in 495 with his son Cynric in five ships. He is said to have fought a Brittonic king named Natanleod at Netley Marsh in Hampshire and killed him thirteen years later (in 508) and to have fought at *Cerdicesleag* (Charford, Cerdic's Ford^[1]) in 519, after which he became first king of Wessex. The conquest of the Isle of Wight is also mentioned among his campaigns, and it was later given to his kinsmen, Stuf and Wihtgar (who had supposedly arrived with the West Saxons in 514). Cerdic is said to have died in 534 and was succeeded by his son Cynric.

The early history of Wessex in the Chronicle is clearly muddled ^[2] and enters duplicate reports of events. David Dumville has suggested that Cerdic's true regnal dates are 538-554. Some scholars suggest that Cerdic was the Saxon leader defeated by the Britons at the Battle of Mount Badon, which was probably fought sometime between 490 and 518. This cannot be the case if Dumville is correct, and others assign this battle to Ælle or another Saxon leader.

While Cerdic's area of operation was, according to the Chronicle, in the area north of Southampton, there is also stronger archaeological evidence of early Anglo-Saxon activity in the area around Dorchester-on-Thames. This is the later location of the first West Saxon bishopric, in the first half of the seventh century, so it appears likely that the origins of the kingdom of Wessex are more complex than the version provided by the surviving traditions.^[3]

Some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that Cerdic is purely a legendary figure, and had no actual

Cerdic



Imaginary depiction of Cerdic from John Speed's 1611 "Saxon Heptarchy".

King of Wessex

Reign	519-534
Predecessor	None
Successor	Cynric
Issue	
Cynric	
House	House of Wessex
Died	534

existence, but this is a minority view. However, the earliest source for Cerdic, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, was put together in the late ninth century; though it probably does record the extant tradition of the founding of Wessex, the intervening four hundred years mean that the account cannot be assumed to be accurate.^{[4][5]}

Descent from Cerdic became a necessary criterion for later kings of Wessex, and Egbert of Wessex, progenitor of the English royal house and subsequent rulers of England and Britain, claimed him as an ancestor.

Origins

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle provides a pedigree tracing Cerdic's ancestry back to Wōden and the antediluvian patriarchs. However, Kenneth Sisam has shown that this pedigree resulted from a process of elaboration upon a root pedigree borrowed from the kings of Bernicia, and hence prior to Cerdic himself it has no historical basis.^[6]

Curiously, the name Cerdic is thought to be Brittonic – a form of the name Ceretic or Caradog (in Latin *Caratacus*) – rather than Germanic in origin.^[7] This may indicate that Cerdic was a native Briton, and that his dynasty became Anglicised over time.^[8] This view is supported by the non-Germanic names of some of his descendants including Ceawlin, Cedda and Caedwalla. Conversely some Welsh princely dynasties derive from early ancestors with Germanic names such as Tewdrig (Theodoric) and his father Teithfallt. This suggests that ethnicity was possibly not as important in the establishment of rulership within the proto-states of Post-Roman Britain as has been traditionally thought. Cerdic's father, Elesa, has been identified by some scholars with the Romano-Briton Elasius, the "chief of the region", met by Germanus of Auxerre.^{[9][10]}

J.N.L. Myres noted that when Cerdic and Cynric first appear in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in s.a. 495 they are described as *ealdormen*, which at that point in time was a fairly junior rank.^[11] Myres remarks that,

It is thus odd to find it used here to describe the leaders of what purports to be an independent band of invaders, whose origins and authority are not otherwise specified. It looks very much as if a hint is being conveyed that Cerdic and his people owed their standing to having been already concerned with administrative affairs under Roman authority on this part of the Saxon Shore.

Furthermore, it is not until s.a. 519 that Cerdic and Cynric are recorded as "beginning to reign", suggesting that they ceased being dependent vassals or ealdormen and became independent kings in their own right.

Summing up, Myres believed that,

It is thus possible ... to think of Cerdic as the head of a partly British noble family with extensive territorial interests at the western end of the Litus Saxonicum. As such he may well have been entrusted in the last days of Roman, or sub-Roman authority with its defence. He would then be what in later Anglo-Saxon terminology could be described as an ealdorman. ... If such a dominant native family as that of Cerdic had already developed blood-relationships with existing Saxon and Jutish settlers at this end of the Saxon Shore, it could very well be tempted, once effective Roman authority had faded, to go further. It might have taken matters into its own hands and after eliminating any surviving pockets of resistance by competing British chieftains, such as the mysterious Natanleod of annal 508, it could 'begin to reign' without recognizing in future any superior authority.^[12]

Some would disagree with Myres, as Cerdic is reported to have landed in Hampshire. Some also would say that the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle proves that Cerdic was indeed a Saxon, however it does not prove that he had no Celtic blood. Some scholars believe it likely that his mother was a British Celt who left for the Continent, or perhaps a Continental Celt. Geoffrey Ashe postulates he may be a son of Riothamus.

Modern times

The name "Cedric" (in place of "Cerdic") arose from a misspelling in the novel *Ivanhoe*, by Sir Walter Scott.

Cerdic is the main protagonist in the historical novel *Conscience of the King* (1951), by the English author Alfred Duggan.

Cerdic was the primary antagonist of the 2004 film *King Arthur*. He and Cynric were depicted as Saxon invaders, and were killed, respectively, by Arthur and Lancelot at the Battle of Badon Hill (Mons Badonicus). Cerdic was portrayed by Stellan Skarsgård.

Bernard Cornwell names him as a rival of Aelle of Sussex, in his *Warlord Chronicles*.

Rosemary Sutcliff makes him the half-Briton half-Saxon offspring of Hengest's daughter and the British king Vortigern in her Arthurian saga, an ally of Arthur's treacherous son and the unifier of the Saxons.

In Helen Hollick's Pendragon's Banner trilogy, Cerdic is presented as King Arthur's son by his divorced first wife, Winifred. Later, he marries Arthur's former lover, Mathild, and she gives birth to Cynric. It is uncertain whether Cynric is Cerdic's or Arthur's son.

Cerdic's name may be commemorated in the name of the village of Chearsley, Buckinghamshire, which appears in the *Domesday Book* (1086) as Cerdeslai. This is assumed to be the place mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as Cerdicesleah, where King Cerdic and his son Cynric defeated the Britons in 527.

References

- [^] British History Online, Victoria County History, North Charford with South Charford (<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=56881>)
- [^] Sir Charles Oman (Oman, *England Before the Conquest*, 1910:244) found the Wessex annals in the Chronicle "meagre and inexplicable", "confused and suspicious"; Oman's speculation that events in the annals had been duplicated was taken up in detail by Kenneth Harrison (Harrison, "Early Wessex Annals in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" *The English Historical Review* **86** No. 340 (July 1971:527-533).
- [^] Fletcher, Richard (1989). *Who's Who in Roman Britain and Anglo-Saxon England*. Shephard-Walwyn. pp. 22–23. ISBN 0-85683-089-5.
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- [^] Sisam, Kenneth, "Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 39, pp. 287–348 (1953)
- [^] Jackson, Kenneth (1953), *Language and History in Early Britain*. Edinburgh. pp. 554, 557, 613 and 680.
- [^] Koch, J.T., (2006) *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ABC-CLIO, ISBN 1-85109-440-7, pp. 392–393.
- [^] Grosjean, P., *Analecta Bollandiana*, 1957. Hagiographie Celtique pp. 158–226.
- [^] Howorth, H.H., "The Beginnings of Wessex", *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 13, No. 52 (Oct., 1898), pp. 667–671
- [^] Myres, J.N.L. (1989) *The English Settlements*. Oxford University Press, pp. 146–147
- [^] Myres, Chapter 6 - for all preceding comment.

External links

- A pedigree depicting his legendary descent from Woden (<http://www.fabpedigree.com/s036/f014287.htm>)
- A pedigree depicting his suggested connection to Arthurian legend (<http://www.fabpedigree.com/s004/f020760.htm>)
- The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle which says he and his son arrived in Hampshire (at Cerdic's Ore) (http://www.islandguide.co.uk/history/anglo_saxon/chronicle4.htm)

Regnal titles		
New title Saxons arrive in southern Britain	King of Wessex 519–534	Succeeded by Cynric

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