



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

AETHELFLAED & ATHELRED

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Aethelflaed & Athelred

Introduction

If you've been watching the Last Kingdom lately, you will have seen that Athelred is portrayed as a monstrous and cruel character who mistreated Aethelflaed and humiliated her at every opportunity. There is no truth in this and in fact the evidence that is available indicates that they had a healthy relationship.

Aethelflaed

Aethelflaed was the daughter of King Alfred and as was customary in those times, she would be married to someone designated by her father to cement political alliances and to advance the power of the Wessex court.

Aethelflaed was probably about 16 when she wed Athelred. Whether they loved one another in the modern sense will never be known but what is clear, is that they would both be held in high regard in Mercia and that they would both be very active in the wars against the Danes.

Athelred

Athelred was a member of the Hwicce tribe which would eventually be incorporated into the confederation of Anglo Saxon tribes that would form the nation of Mercia.

Athelred, remember, was an ealdorman who was elected by the Witan as the Lord of Mercia. He was never a King.

In 877 the Danes overran Mercia and occupied Gloucester. They placed a Mercian Lord called Ceolwulf on the throne, but he was just a puppet, used to placate the Mercian population and keep them placid.

Alfred's preservation of Wessex and its subsequent rise to be a nation that was capable of keeping the Danes at bay, ensured that Mercia would follow suite but it would be Alfred's manipulation of the political system that would set the course which would lead to the unification of the two nations.

The recapture of London from the Danes by Alfred required that he appointed a Mercian Lord to administer and rebuild the city. London or Lundenwic had, previously, been under Mercian control for over a century. Alfred chose Athelred, so he must have seen qualities in him and then by betrothing Aethelflaed to him, Alfred cemented his position as overlord over the Kingdom of Mercia.

Aethelflaed's mother, Ealhswith, had been a Mercian Princess. She never held the title of Queen during her marriage to Alfred.

Aethelflaed's husband, Athelred fought successfully against the Danes and she too, appears to have been present during many of his campaigns.

Athelred also supported Alfred against the Danes at Thorney Island in 893, when Haesten, a Danish leader who had been raiding in the Thames Valley, was besieged. For some unknown reason, the army of Wessex gave up the siege and left Athelred and his Welsh allies to continue. Athelred eventually forced Haesten to surrender.

Athelred then supported Alfred's son and heir, Edward in besieging Haesten at Benfleet. This resulted in the destruction of the Danish fleet and their army. Haesten's wife and children were captured and taken as hostages. Haesten escaped.

Despite his defeat, Haesten returned the following year. He took the main part of his force to Shoebury in Essex but a raiding party army was cornered by Athelred at Buttingham, near to modern day Welshpool, and destroyed.

Haesten was driven from Shoebury and arrived in Chester in 993 where he was besieged by Athelred. Two of his sons had by this time been returned to him by Alfred, who'd had them baptised. The fate of his wife is unknown.

Athelred besieged Chester and evening burnt all the surrounding Mercian farmlands to prevent the Vikings obtaining food. That autumn, Haesten and his army vacated Chester and entered Wales where they caused havoc. Haesten and his men were eventually cornered at Bridgenorth by Athelred. It appears that he agreed to return to east Anglia but we do not know if a battle took place or if he just accepted that his position was hopeless.

In 996, Haesten disappeared from history. We know nothing about his eventual fate.

A Norman monk wrote this about him.

This was a man accursed: fierce, mightily cruel, and savage, pestilent, hostile, sombre, truculent, given to outrage, pestilent and untrustworthy, fickle and lawless. Death-dealing, uncouth, fertile in ruses, warmonger general, traitor, fomenter of evil, and double-dyed dissimulator ... Dudo of St. Quentin's. Gesta Normannorum. Book 1. Chapter 3.

Haesten - A little more information.

Haesten was a successful warlord and raider. He had led a joint expedition with Bjorn Ironsides (allegedly the first born son of the legendary Ragnar Lothbrok) between 859 and 862 into Frankia and Muslim controlled Southern Spain. He attacked several Mediterranean countries and sacked several cities. He also raided the Balearic Islands but his most famous and daring escapade was when he attacked the Italian city of Luna, thinking it was Rome.

The siege was failing so he had his men carry him to the city gates where they stated that he was dying and he wanted to repent and be baptised. Incredibly they let him enter the city, whereupon he jumped off his stretcher and he and his men then overpowered the guards, seized the gates and his army then entered and sacked the city.

He later sacked Pisa before raiding Byzantine territories and then he raided North Africa, taking many slaves before sailing to Ireland where he sold them. En-route he sacked Pamplona in Spain. So if anyone fitted the image of a true Viking, Haesten is the typical stereotype.

He came to England in 892. He was 71 years old. After his Mediterranean adventures he'd been very active in Northern France, so this was an experienced and dangerous enemy for the Saxons to deal with.

He seized the Royal Villa at Milton but was prevented from linking up with a larger Viking army by Alfred who managed to drive them off. The following year, Haesten was caught by Prince Edward's army at Farnham and heavily defeated.

Back to Athelred

Alfred the great died in 899 and was succeeded by his son Edward (known as the elder). Allied with Mercia, Edward took the Danes on and regained control over East Anglia. In 910, a combined Wessex and Mercian army destroyed a large Viking army at the battle of Wodensfield, now Tettenhall, outside of Wolverhampton. Aethelflaed led the Mercian army, not Athelred.

At this time Athelred was chronically ill. It would appear that his health had been in serious decline for some time. The effective ruler in Mercia, was now Aethelflaed.

In 902, it was Aethelflaed who had granted Hiberno- Norse Vikings permission to settle in the Wirral.

In 907, it was Aethelflaed who defeated the Hiberno Norse and their allies at the Siege of Chester.

Athelred died in 912, and the Mercians would now be led by Aethelflaed.

Aethelflaed and Athelred are only known to have one child, a daughter called Aelfwynne .

We know that Aethelflaed continued the war against the Danes and the Norse and we know that one of her greatest achievements was her capture of Derby. She was venerated by the Mercian people and held in high esteem, even by the defeated Danes.

It is recorded in the annals of Ireland that Aethelflaed had attacked a large Norse army and chased the survivors into a large wood. She allegedly ordered her army to either cut down or burn that wood so that all the Norse would be killed. The leader of the Norse was said to have been one Oittir.

In either 914 or 918, a great battle took place between the Scots, led by Constantine and the Norse, led by Gofraid ua Imair, the father of Anlaf Guthfrithson at Corbridge. The date has never been verified. If it had been fought in 918, it must have been prior to June 918 because Aethelflaed died then. The Chronicles of the Kings of Alba state that it was in 918, which if true, demonstrates that Aethelflaed's last great act was to fight alongside the Scottish King against an enemy whose son would join with the Scottish King to fight against her nephew Athelstan, 19 years later at Brunanburh.

When Aethelflaed died in 918, there was an expectation amongst the Mercian people that Aelfwynne would become the lady of Mercia. Aelfwynne would have been about 30 at this time. She did fulfil this role for some 18 months before Edward the Elder disposed of her. We don't know what happened. There is an inference that she was confined to a nunnery but it is not clear. What is though, is that Edward took direct control over Mercia and then resumed his war against the Danelaw.

Five years after the disposal of Aelfwynne, Edward had to suppress a rebellion against the Mercians of Chester.

This looks like a real version of a game of thrones. Was Edward resentful of Aethelflaed's popularity? He defiantly needed her for his wars against the Vikings. Why did he remove Aelfwynne from power, obviously not a popular move amongst the Mercians? Did he want to ensure that his 'bastard' son Athelstan was to succeed to rule in Mercia whilst his nominated heir, Aelfweard was to rule in Wessex?

When Edward died, Athelstan did become King of Mercia, but Aelfweard, elected King of Wessex, died, just 16 days after Edward the elder, leaving Athelstan to lay claim to the Kingship of Wessex, which only became a reality just over a year after Aelfweard's death.

This period is confusing because records are sparse and often contradictory. There was real opposition to Athelstan in Wessex and a danger of war between the two states became a possibility. Some sources even implicate Athelstan in Aelfweard's death. Who knows the truth of it.

The truth is, this is a fascinating story, which involved some real personalities, for me, I think Haesten is the one who grabs the attention because he obviously lived life to the full. What is clear, is that early medieval politics was brutal and that they were all opportunists but it would appear that Aethelflaed and Athelred did make a good team.

Make your own minds up.